

## The Mech 5591

### Chapter 5591 Explosive Deterrence

Ves' lengthy meeting with his latest Mastery experience host finally came to an end.

As much as Ves and Irene still had a lot more topics to talk about, the busy god pilot had a lot of priorities on her plate. It was unreasonable for her to set aside her immense responsibilities to keep him company for an extended period of time.

Irene still had a few more topics to talk about with Cynthia. The True Gods undoubtedly wanted to discuss more serious matters out of earshot of a mere Senior Mech Designer.

As Ves stood up and reluctantly let go of Emma, he bowed to Irene in respect and gratitude.

He also made an additional request.

"I need a storage medium for this powerful spiritual fragment. It is too conspicuous and dangerous to keep it in an exposed state. I am also doubtful whether any of the hyper materials I have back home is up to the task of containing its power."

This was a legitimate question. The first spiritual fragment that Ves harvested from Emma was back when he had just created her during the time when Irene was still an expert pilot.

Now that both Irene and Emma had become True Gods, the power locked inside the spiritual fragment had reached a whole new level!

Ves already started to entertain dangerous ideas on how he could make use of this amazingly potent spiritual ingredient.

However, it was best if he maintained restraint and kept it as untouched as possible. He knew from past experience that he could use it to summon an energy manifestation of Emma. This could be a powerful lifesaver, especially now that the improved fragment was able to support a much greater extent of her presence than during the Survivalist conference.

In any case, Irene acted on his latest request and made sure to provide Ves with a suitable container for the spiritual fragment.

She raised her arm and began to concentrate for a moment. Her god kingdom began to weaken its restraint just enough for Irene to break the laws of reality once again!

Ves grew amazed as he saw the god pilot employ one of the characteristic powers that was only accessible to True Gods and higher.

A small statue of a cat slowly came into being. The object closely resembled a static image of Emma and appeared to be made of an unknown variety of orange-colored hyper metal that was completely compatible with the destruction attribute.

It took less than a minute for Irene to create the orange cat statue out of thin air.

Ves grew incredibly envious of Irene's ability to conjure up high-quality materials out of nothing. He could employ this power in so many useful ways!

"Thank... thank you, Irene." He said as he carefully took hold of the floating cat statue. It felt warm to his touch. "I will treat it with great respect."

[Do not squander this gift.]

With that, his mother and the god pilot unceremoniously ushered him out of the secure chamber.

His vision blurred for a moment before he ended up in front of a security gate that was manned by the mechers.

"Meow!"

Lucky appeared next to Ves just as the mechers immediately became alarmed at their unexpected appearance.

Fortunately, the mechers soon confirmed their identities and sent them to a command room where a number of staffers and officers oversaw a part of the cleanup operations.

Ves met a familiar friend when he entered the room.

"Jovie."

"Ves."

"I think we need to talk."

The RA Senior nodded and gestured to the side. "I have already prepared a more secure location where we can have a chat."

They moved to a meeting room that promptly activated a jamming field along with other security precautions.

The level of security was not as high as before, but it was fine so long as they didn't talk about anything too important.

"Meow meow meow." Lucky resentfully hissed as Jovie.

"My cat is pretty upset about the lack of warning." Ves said as he sat down at the closest seat. "He has incurred a lot of damage. If Master Xieliq Quan's unexpected electrical blast was any more powerful, then Lucky might not be able to remain in one piece."

Jovie responded with an apologetic smile. "I am not in control here. Others made the decision that it was best to keep you in the dark, so we could not give you any forewarning. If there is anything that we regret, it is that we relied too much on the transphasic energy shields of Phoca Arena for protection. High-tech attack methods that can bypass energy shields entirely are rare, but not unheard of. We mostly assumed that they are only employed in known first-class weapon systems. We sincerely did not expect that the Dustweaver had the ability to launch such an attack a single time."

All of this sounded too easy to Ves. The mechers probably did not feel any remorse at all for using Ves as bait.

"Did you know or suspect that Master Quan was a human traitor?"

"No. Absolutely not. We are not that good, Ves. The cosmopolitans have perfected the art of infiltrating our ranks and hiding their true allegiances from our most effective means of detection. Master Quan is one of the highest-ranking leaders of his cell and most certainly upgraded his countermeasures to an excessive degree. Not even the Destroyer of Worlds should have been able to

detect any malice from him until he took action. That is how challenging it is to root these hidden cosmopolitan leaders or sympathizers from our ranks."

It was not entirely the Red Association's fault that Master Quan had been able to threaten Ves to this extent.

Even if a more secure accident threatened to occur, the mechers still weren't completely worried.

From the moment the Destroyer of Worlds arrived from afar and volunteered her services for this secret operation, its success rate had increased to 99 percent!

Not even the arrival of an ancient phase whale could threaten Ves anymore!

This was also the reason why Ves did not feel so upset. Everything ultimately ended well. The various benefits that he received from his latest 'friend' also did much to improve his mood!

He did not miss the instances where Jovie directed wary and curious glances at the new orange cat statue.

It was too bad that Ves was not in the mood to explain. There was no reason for him to inform the mechers what he intended to do with Emma's spiritual fragment. This was strictly private business.

As both mech designers sat at the table, Jovie briefly summarized what happened after Master Quan had been taken into custody.

"Your final challenger may have been the only assassin who took action against your life today, but he is not the only person with hostile intentions. We have been monitoring the entire city and detected hundreds of suspicious individuals, though only a minority of them had designs for your life. The Destroyer of Worlds briefly utilized her god kingdom to conduct her own sweep. Together, we managed to identify dozens of people who looked for opportunities to make their moves or provide support to facilitate the operations."

That sounded incredibly concerning. Even if their chances of taking action were minimal due to the heavy security measures, the fact that they had been lurking in the neighborhood did not reassure Ves.

Aside from that, how many more people with ill intent managed to escape detection? Ves was not naive to think that the RA and the Destroyer of Worlds managed to catch every single threat.

"Did you manage to find any additional cosmopolitans among the captives?" Ves asked.

"Not initially." Jovie admitted. "As long as the cosmopolitans do not make any mistakes, it is fiendishly difficult to distinguish them from the crowd. The good news is that we have temporarily locked the city down. We have shut down all outbound traffic for half a day in order to buy time to root out any backup and support personnel. Our interrogators are working to obtain the names of his accomplices in his cell with the help of the Destroyer of World's god kingdom."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "Before Master Quan tried to take my life, he briefly talked with me about the Cosmopolitan Movement. He claimed that he was a part of the Indigo Cell and actually tried to invite me to become a part of his crazy group."

Jovie chuckled at that. He knew his friend well enough that such an invitation was doomed to fail.

"It is uncommon for cosmopolitans to invite outsiders to join their cells. Every new recruit introduces another security risk. It is much more common for the cosmopolitans to deliver fresh

blood to their cells by raising them young. By indoctrinating the minds of children when they are still young, they can instill strong loyalty and prevent them from accepting the lessons taught by our Association. This is one of the many means the cosmopolitans use to maintain their secrecy over the ages."

"That sounds really tricky." Ves remarked. "How much of a problem are the cosmopolitans, exactly? From what it sounds like, many cells are embedded in our society. It is even possible that they had infiltrated the ranks of your Association."

"We employ many invasive detection and monitoring methods to minimize that risk. We are not too worried that the cosmopolitans will be able to abuse their positions within our organization. Their capacity to do damage in other states and organizations is admittedly greater, but as far as we know, the vast majority of the cosmopolitans who are living among us never undertake radical actions. The cosmopolitans are not terrorists. They are activists. They seem extreme in the only times where it is known that they have taken action, but they are outliers rather than the majority. Most cosmopolitans contribute to their cause by using their positions in society to steal valuable intelligence and technological secrets."

That actually made a lot of sense. Ves was not sure how much of that was true, but he grew a bit relieved after he learned that most cosmopolitans were content to stick to their roles as informers.

Ves turned his thoughts to the future.

"Now that we have thwarted Master Quan's attempt at my life, what is the chance that I will suffer another attack?"

"Much less than before." Jovy confidently replied. "The Destroyer of Worlds has personally taken action to save your life. The Ragnarok even made a brief public appearance. That sends a strong message to the public. Her Divinity has essentially signaled her support to you. Anyone who touches you will risk the chance that a god pilot will personally take action to track down the culprits and demolish them in person. Nobody wants to provoke an unreasonably powerful personality."

High-ranking mech pilots were incredibly willful. They placed great value on their promises and friendships. Anyone who tried to test these bonds would definitely make these god pilots furious!

Even the cosmopolitans did not have the strength to confront a god pilot head-on. Nothing good would happen if they provoked a god pilot to the point where the powerhouse went on a personal crusade against the Cosmopolitan Movement!

Ves felt relieved. "I see. I can make use of that. Hopefully, no one will be stupid enough to take action in the coming years. I don't want to get dragged into any trouble. I just want to design my mechs and complete my promotion to a first-class mech designer."

"We would like to see that happen as well."

"Will the Bluejay Fleet receive any reinforcements? I think it is more than reasonable to give me protection that is normally afforded to a tier 2 galactic citizen. After all, the bounty on my head has already reached this level."

"That... is a difficult request to meet." Jovie frowned. "Our core forces are stretched on too many fronts. One of the standards that we must meet in order to satisfy your request is to permanently

assign an ace pilot as your principal bodyguard. That alone is problematic as each and every ace pilot is a critical asset in the war."

Ves sighed. "I understand. I will have to raise my own ace pilots."

Chapter 5592 Isthmus Manufacturing

"Welcome back, boss."

"Mmhmm."

Ves had reached his mental limit by the time that he returned to his suite at the local branch headquarters of the Larkinson Clan.

Exhaustion radiated from his body as he sat down on a couch like an old man who had returned from a long day of work.

"Meow meow meow..."

Lucky meanwhile dug into the bowl of high-grade exotics that Gavin had especially prepared as an evening snack. The cat had already eaten several meals before, but his hunger remained unabated as it took a surprising amount of energy and resources to repair his damaged archemetal body.

That, or the cat simply took advantage of this opportunity to scam more food out of Ves.

Before Ves addressed his assistant, he activated the room projector and tuned in on a random news broadcast.

[...The Destroyer of Worlds has made an unexpected appearance in Bortele III. She took action to save one of the latest and most unusual tier 3 galactic citizens of the Red Ocean Union. It still remains unclear why the Rubarthan god pilot personally saw fit to foil an assassination attempt on Professor Ves Larkinson. Her spokespeople have yet to publish a statement nor respond to any of our inquiries. In lieu of further information, our panel of experts stand ready to speculate on whether there is an undisclosed connection between the god pilot and the Senior Mech Designer...]

[...Sales of LMC products have spiked yet again as a much greater body of consumers became exposed to them. The involvement of the Destroyer of Worlds has placed a much stronger spotlight on the mech designer that earned her protection...]

[...CATS ARE TAKING OVER OUR CIVILIZATION! I TOLD YOU THAT A SECRET CABAL OF CATS HAVE BEEN ATTEMPTING TO UPLIFT THEMSELVES. NOW, THEIR PLAN HAS FINALLY REACHED A NEW PHASE. ONCE THESE KNOWN CAT LOVERS JOIN FORCES, THEY SHALL UNLEASH A FORCE UNLIKE ANYTHING WE HAVE SEEN BEFORE! BY THE TIME THEIR RAMPAGE COMES TO AN END, THE CATS WILL COME AND SUBJUGATE US UNDER TYRANNICAL REIGN!...]

Ves continued to switch channels over the next few minutes. Though the reporting and the opinions espoused by the journalists did not fully reflect everyone's opinion, he was able to gain a broad understanding of what the public thought about the events that happened today.

"It looks like the failed assassination attempt has crowded out every other newsworthy event." He concluded. "It's a shame that none of the news portals place any special emphasis on the process and the outcome of the challenge matches. The four matches were truly exciting and worthwhile to watch."

Gavin chuckled for a bit. "We have tried to use our channels in the media to shift as much attention to our products as possible, but all everyone wants to talk about is the Destroyer of Worlds saving the day once again. It is fine, though. You cannot imagine how much she has helped our business. Any association with a god pilot is a dream come true for a mech company. More people have become exposed to the Fey Fianna than ever. We have already received a lot of orders, and we expect this temporary boost to last for the remainder of the week. That is not the greatest change, however."

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "What is making you so excited?"

"Don't you realize it, boss? We have gained a huge amount of legitimacy. It is not every day that a god pilot diverts her precious time to foil an attempt on your life. Few people think that it is just a coincidence that she was in the neighborhood and just happened to be in a place to act as your secret guard. No matter whether she has said anything or not, it is clear that she is supportive of you. This is the most direct form of endorsement that you have received from a tier 1 galactic citizen yet. Your ties to other god pilots and Star Designers are much less clear, so we never managed to profit from them as much as we wished. This is different."

"What difference does that make?"

"People are much more inclined to believe in the claims and promises related to the Fey Fianna. You have to be aware that there are many people who do not have the time or interest to watch your presentation and the subsequent challenge matches. All they know about the Fey Fianna are boasts that sound wildly exaggerated. Those descriptions have become a lot more legit now that a god pilot is indirectly backing you up. That alone will help us sustain our sales momentum over months or maybe years."

That certainly sounded like a powerful effect. Unfortunately, Ves was not entirely sure whether the LMC could take proper advantage of this boost.

"All of the increased orders won't mean anything for our bottom line if our production has already reached its limit. From what I have heard, all of our mech factories are working at full capacity." He sighed.

Gavin had a surprise for Ves.

"You are underestimating the effect of receiving the implicit endorsement of a god pilot. One of the biggest reasons why we have been slow to expand our production capacity and contract more third-party mech manufacturers is because we have played out our reputation. This has changed now that the Destroyer of Worlds has bestowed us with her vote of confidence. A whole new group of large and powerful organizations has initiated contact with us, particularly ones based in the Rubarthan Pact. Many of these parties are eager to cooperate with us. Few of them have maintained their condescending attitude towards a smaller player such as us. After all, who knows whether you will badmouth them in front of the god pilot one day. As long as we carefully manage our new relationships, we can quickly shorten the waiting list for our latest product."

The Fey Fianna had proven its strength and capabilities enough times to win over a lot of people. The popularity of the LMC's first proper product line of the Hyper Generation had become so high that demand vastly exceeded supply.

Anything that could help the LMC increase the ability to fulfill orders was necessary as far as Ves was concerned!

The longer his customers had to wait, the longer they spent time without the powerful living mechs that could save their lives and grow alongside their mech pilots.

What Ves feared the most was that the excessive delays would cause customers to become frustrated and cancel their orders. There were many other hyper mechs for sale that did not require a year of waiting before it could be delivered to people's doorsteps!

Gavin presented an offer that stood out from all of the rest.

"There is one company that has made many of the executives in the company excited. The offer that we have received from this party is not the most lucrative, nor the largest in scale, but it scores high enough in both areas that it would be a dereliction of our duty to put it aside. What is also important is that the offer is highly credible and has a high likelihood of relieving our production bottlenecks in both the short and medium term."

That certainly aroused Ves' attention.

"Tell me more about this company."

"Isthmus Manufacturing is a serious player in the galactic mech market. It is based in the Rubarthan Pact and is a middle-sized player in the mech market over there. That is already impressive in itself considering that it has to compete against many other powerful Rubarthan mech manufacturers."

Ves briefly furrowed his brows. "Does the company have any prominent mech designers?"

"Surprisingly, no. While the company definitely employs a large amount of mech designers, Isthmus Manufacturing is not a strong brand name in itself. Its first-party products are relatively unremarkable. The real focus is on the production of products developed by other mech designers. The company takes advantage of its excellent connections with suppliers and shipping companies to produce a relatively limited selection of high-volume, high-margin mech models at a lower overall cost."

Ves grew more attentive. A mech manufacturer that could produce large quantities of mechs while keeping its costs under control was exactly what the LMC sought!

"I see. Are the mechs produced and sold by Isthmus cheaper than the competition?"

"That is not necessarily the case. The reason why Isthmus only agrees to produce highly popular bestsellers is because it wants to keep milking its cash cows for years to come without engaging in a price to the bottom. The value in partnering up with this Rubarthan mech manufacturing company is in its ability to consistently maintain large production volumes. Not only does it have a large amount of highly efficient and reliable first-class and second-class product lines at its disposal, but it has secured long-term contracts with enough material suppliers to keep them running."

This meant that if the LMC agreed to work with Isthmus, the latter company won't necessarily be cheap, but it would definitely be able to fulfill many orders that would otherwise be languishing on the increasingly more excessive waiting list!

Ves was not greedy. He did not mind if Isthmus Manufacturing wanted to receive a large cut of the profits. That was its right as a third-party producer. What truly mattered was how much production it was willing to devote to the Fey Fianna line.

"How much production can Isthmus Manufacturing handle?"

Gavin grinned wider. "Let me put it this way. If we sign a contract by the end of the week, the representatives of Isthmus have promised that they can muster up enough production capacity to fulfill half of all Standard Fey Fianna orders on our waiting list by the end of the month."

Half of all of the orders of the new Standard Edition of the Fey Fianna?!

That was hundreds of thousands of copies of the new second-class hyper drone mech design!

"I take it that is not the limit." Ves guessed.

"This cooperation offer has come at the right time. We are still in the early stage of the Hyper Generation. Isthmus Manufacturing has already agreed to produce large quantities of second-class hyper mechs for other clients, but none of these models are expected to last very long. The application of hyper technology is too crude in comparison to your latest work. If the demand for the Fey Fianna continues to rise, Isthmus is more than willing to drop the production of outdated third-party hyper mechs and dedicate the newly available capacity to serving our needs."

"Did you remind Isthmus that our living mechs must be fabricated according to a more demanding linear process?"

"The Rubarthan mech manufacturer is already aware of our requirements. It is not a secret. It is clear that Isthmus has done its due diligence before it has made contact with us. The company believes so much in your design ability that it has even made another promise. As long as your subsequent second-class mech designs are able to match or exceed the sales potential of the Fey Fianna, Isthmus is more than willing to free up additional production capacity to meet the spike in demand. The Rubarthans in charge of the mech manufacturer love nothing more than to keep as many of its production lines running in a stable manner for years on end. This is the foundation of their business model."

"Interesting..."

Everything he heard about Isthmus was positive. Ves saw little reason why he should deny this offer. Cooperating with Isthmus sounded a lot easier than trying to negotiate individual production agreements with dozens of smaller mech manufacturers!

Of course, he still needed to do more research before he was willing to get in bed with this larger player.

"I can schedule a virtual meeting with the CEO of Isthmus Manufacturing if you wish."

"Do so. By the way, where is Isthmus Manufacturing based in the Rubarthan Pact?"

"Its headquarters is located in the Impresario Principality. Don't worry. The Impresario Prince has not taken side in the political struggle for the throne. He has been trying to maintain his neutrality."

"That name sounds familiar..."

Chapter 5593 Novastella



The product reveal had come to an end, but Ves was not ready to depart from Bortele III.

As a major military and industrial hub, the Bortele System attracted a lot of people, goods, groups, companies and more.

Lots of salvage from many different battlefields constantly trickled in from time to time. Even the latest incident related to Ves could not stop the local economy from booming.

Ves could get a lot of stuff done on this planet. It would be a waste for him to depart too early.

Alexa Streon had already begun the process of headhunting another batch of second-class Journeyman Mech Designers.

Now that Ves received several reminders why it was important for him to remain active in the second-class mech industry, he did not want to neglect this business at all. The profit levels might not be as great compared to running a successful first-class mech business, but the quantity of units sold was much greater!

Volume was quite important to many mech designers. One of the reasons why first-class mech designers occasionally designed second-class mechs that were ordinarily beneath them was because it was a lot easier to sell millions of copies.

The first-class mech market was a lot smaller. Not only that, but the level of competition was a lot higher, making it so that the bigger players left much less room for independent businesses to thrive.

Ves knew that he could not rely on the various reputation boosts to forcibly carve out a place in the first-class mech market. The customers over there were much more demanding and discerning. No amount of hype could compensate for inferior performance.

Seeing that it was way more challenging for a mech designer to get started in the first-class mech market, Ves needed to ensure that his LMC remained active and healthy in the second-class mech market.

This was rather challenging when many of the lead designers of the Design Department had gone off to undergo EdNet training.

"Several years must have passed from their perspective." Ves mused as his hands idly played with Emma's metal container. "By the time they come out a few years later, they have already mentally aged by 20 years."

The changes would be massive. Relatively young and vigorous Journeymen such as Sara Voiken and Cormaunt Hempkamp would lose a lot of the restlessness and spontaneity that characterized their age.

In return, they would come out with all of the knowledge in advanced science and engineering that they managed to cram in their heads for 20 straight years.

This was definitely a great tradeoff to most second-class mech designers. It was a surefire way for them to quickly gain the qualifications to design first-class mech designs. It would have been unlikely for them to gain this precious opportunity through other means.

Yet... Ves still did not forward to the prospect of using an EdNet quota himself.

The main reason why he rejected it was because he did not want to isolate himself from reality during an important moment in history.

However, Ves had to admit that he also feared the loss of the traits that would only stay with him for so long.

The older he became, the harder it became for him to just set aside his rationality and give in to his emotional desires.

Many people usually saw this as a character flaw, but Ves did not share the same opinion.

He designed many of his best works during moments of intense passion!

While Ves did not think he would ever lose the ability to get inspired, he suspected that it might not happen as frequently in the future.

The longer he lived, the more he became burdened by knowledge and concerns.

How long would it take for him to transition into an old fogey who spent most of his time thinking about problems relating to the survival and prosperity of red humanity?

"Ignorance is bliss." He sighed.

Ves looked down at the metal cat statue that the Destroyer of Worlds had gifted to him. The object radiated a clear sense of warmth and threat.

The large spiritual fragment donated by Emma was so powerful that if he could blow it up somehow, the resulting spiritual blast would be powerful enough to kill his weaker design spirits!

It was literally a weapon of mass destruction packaged in a small metal ornament!

He couldn't allow this fragment to fall into the wrong hands.

"At least I don't have to worry about using it up too quickly." He smirked.

Perhaps Irene had become annoyed at the fact that Ves used up the initial spiritual fragment of Emma too quickly.

If Ves no longer had a fragment at his side, then there was no way for the Destroyer of Worlds to pull him out of danger!

The large spiritual fragment that contained a fraction of the essence of a True God neatly addressed this shortcoming.

Compared to the more ordinary spiritual fragments that Ves handled in the past, he noticed that his latest one had many more useful traits that he appreciated. He also managed to figure out several powerful new uses for this remarkably valuable gift.

"You're actually replenishing your energy level over time." He observed.

Blinky could clearly observe the small energy vortex surrounding the container. It sucked in the destruction-attributed energy from the environment and gradually strengthened the fragment further.

If this process took place long enough, then the large spiritual fragment might one day reach the stage where Emma could be reborn after death!

Of course, the resurrection of a True God-level entity was anything but simple. The energy requirements were so large that the fragment would have to keep absorbing energy for millions of years.

"The absorption rate is too low." Ves frowned.

That meant that if he used up the energy contained in the fragment for various purposes, he would have to wait a long time for it to replenish its reserves.

The main reason why its efficiency was so low was because there was not that much destruction energy floating around in the background.

Perhaps that might change once the Destroyer of Worlds started to act like a demonic cultivator and left a trail of shattered planets in her wake, but for now the local galactic environment was in a state of relative prosperity.

In any case, as long as Ves made sparing use of the spiritual fragment, he did not have to worry about causing it to disappear. He just had to wait a few months or years to recharge and return to its former state.

"How can I improve the replenishment rate?"

A stronger attraction force and a higher concentration of destruction energy should do the job.

The best way to make that happen was if he placed the fragment in an environment that was surrounded by high-grade hyper materials of the right attribute.

Ves developed a greater interest in the metal material that Irene had casually brought into existence by utilizing her powers as a True God.

He did not recognize the material at all, but that shouldn't be too much of a problem. He whipped out his handheld multiscanner and proceeded to examine its properties.

Once he collected a lot of measurements, he accessed the Red Association's internal database and used the parameters to find if there were any matches.

[Novastella. High-grade metallic hyper material. Attributes: destruction, disaster, stars, energy, death. Origin: remnant planetary matter ejected out of a star system by a supernova. Very rare as most Novastella in existence is flung through interstellar space. Only small amounts of Novastella are captured by adjacent star systems and deposited into asteroid belts and natural satellites.]

"Interesting."

The origin of Novastella was absolutely remarkable. Supernovae were not too uncommon on a galactic scale, but it was difficult to harvest all of the matter that got flung in every direction, especially if they were small and scarce in number.

Yet it was exactly because of the remarkable history and formation of Novastella that made it so valuable and powerful!

The Destroyer of Worlds selected this material to create a container for Emma's spiritual fragment for good reason. It matched her domain and inclinations far too well!

Ves even came up with the idea of turning this cat statue into the basis of an extraordinarily powerful warhead!

If he ever found himself in a desperate situation and needed to rely on overwhelming power to defeat an implacable foe, then he could always convert the Novastella cat statue and the remarkably powerful spiritual fragment into a small superweapon that should be exceptionally dangerous against all manner of extraordinary foes!

"This is an enormous waste, though."

Irene may be able to utilize her god kingdom to freely convert energy into Novastella whenever needed, but others had to harvest this rare material the old-fashioned way.

It was impossible for people like Ves to obtain a large and consistent supply of Novastella due to its troublesome formation conditions.

"Ugh, how troublesome."

His clan should be on the lookout for rich deposits of Novastella. Even though it was rare and not that prevalent, perhaps there might be planets where a large chunk of Novastella had fallen in the past.

Ves set the matter of the hyper material aside and summarized the remaining possible uses of this powerful fragment.

He could call upon an energy manifestation of Emma just like before. The power she was able to channel this time was much greater for obvious reasons. He just needed to pay attention to the much greater consumption of the precious spiritual fragment.

Even without calling Emma over, he was still able to borrow a tiny fraction of her powerful domain by stimulating it with spiritual energy.

"Blinky, go do your stuff."

"Mrow."

His companion spirit came out and fed the fragment with a modest amount of destruction energy stored in the Blinkyverse.

The fragment grew more excited and started to produce a stronger energy field in a small radius around its location.

Ves curiously examined the properties of this strengthened energy field and found that it worked much like a prickly disruption field.

Though Ves felt as if he was getting stung by needles from every direction, he was resilient enough to shrug off this irritating effect.

What he cared about was the fact that this mildly destructive field scrambled every electronic signal and messed up the flow of E energy radiation!

This not only made it great for jamming purposes, but could also disrupt all kinds of spiritual sorcery, especially ones that targeted him in particular!

The effect of Emma's domain was not as strong and absolute as Irene's god kingdom, but it was already strong enough to satisfy his demands.

"Stop. Reverse."

Blinky no longer spat out destruction energy, but instead started to devour it from the environment. The spiritual fragment slowly started to get drained as Blinky specifically tried to draw from its reserves.

This was a modest way for Blinky to increase the concentration of destruction energy in his Blinkyverse.

While the quantity of destruction energy was limited, the quality was exceedingly high!

"Stop."

Ves did not dare to absorb too much of Emma's energy. Her imprint on them was so strong that she might actually be able to invade the Blinkyverse as long as enough of her spiritual energy managed to slip inside!

"It's best to be careful."

There were several other ways he could make use of the spiritual fragment. For one, he could use it to directly communicate with Irene if he wanted.

This was much more secure and convenient than speaking with her over the galactic net.

He resisted the temptation to test it out. He had just talked to Irene yesterday. He would just be annoying her if he contacted her for no good reason.

Ves at least needed to wait until he managed to produce a large batch of Emma totems that could serve as excellent conversion tools for Irene's future cult.

"I will have to do an excellent job with that if I want to impress her. It will be difficult for her cult to get off the ground otherwise."

After all, what the Destroyer of Worlds needed to do was nothing less than force the alien masses to worship a hostile human god!

Chapter 5594 Public Company

When Ves was done with playing with Emma's spiritual fragment, he tossed it into the Vault of Eternity.

He would have preferred to keep it close on hand, but it was a little too big and unwieldy to carry by himself.

Once Nitaa returned from EdNet training, Ves would develop a custom suit of armor for her that would allow her to carry the Novastella relic in a dignified manner.

While it was fine for Ves to treat the cat statue like a toy in private, he needed to be much more careful about its treatment once he appeared in public.

Many people literally treated god pilots like deities!

They were worshipful towards god pilots that they would take any perceived insult as a personal affront!

Ves turned his attention to other priorities after dealing with this little matter.

"Are you sure you want to cancel your trip to Port Salience?" Gavin asked in confirmation.

"I am sure." Ves confirmed as he entered the penthouse office on the top floor of the branch headquarters. "Master Quan's assassination attempt may have failed, but I am pretty sure that there are many opportunists lurking in the background. The Red Association already managed to capture dozens of other suspicious characters. This tells me that there are multiple ambitious people and organizations who are looking forward to claiming my bounty. I will just be tempted fate if I visit a rowdy place where the security arrangements are much weaker than on this planet."

The Bortele System had become heavily affected by the increased investment from the Red Two. No one was able to come and go without undergoing strict inspections. The use of mechs and the possession of weapons also became subject to increasingly stringent regulations.

All of this was deemed necessary due to the large intermingling of mech forces looking to earn war merits at the front.

Port Salience was much less trafficked but also much less regulated. It attracted an even less disciplined crowd of people, so the rate of incidents was considerably higher.

Ves would just be asking for trouble if he stepped foot on Port Salience during this sensitive period!

He at least needed to comprehensively upgrade his security arrangements before he dared to show up in public in less secure spaces again.

Gavin Neumann did not object to his direct superior's decision. He quietly felt relieved as well, though he felt it was a pity that he would have to cancel all of the planned meetings and events.

"How are the negotiations with the Eternal Vulcan Empire proceeding? I would like to conclude this deal before I am scheduled to depart from the Bortele System."

"Don't worry. Talks are happening quickly now that the Iron Emperor has given his approval. We are just haggling over the details. At this moment, as long as you agree to allow a batch of 10 Novice Mech Designers to learn from you and intern in the Design Department for a period of 3 years, the Eternal Vulcan Empire is willing to transfer ownership of a relatively modern first-class fleet carrier. The caveat is that she is one of the smaller ones in the dwarven armed forces. The hull is only 1.9 kilometers long and she can only fit 320 mechs."

Ves frowned for a moment. The Vulcan fleet carrier did not fit as much as a typical second-class fleet carrier, but he knew that it was simply a lot more expensive to construct and maintain larger vessels.

First-class combat was all about quality over quantity. Bringing in a large quantity of cheap mechs and cheap starships was a good way to get stomped by superior opponents.

Mech capacity was not the only factor that made fleet carriers so valuable. As long as their hull plating, their power generators, their azure shield generators and so on were good enough, then he was willing to accept this deal.

In any case, it hardly took any effort for him to teach the basics of living mech design to a bunch of Vulcanite mech designers.

After Ves gave his assistant a few instructions regarding this upcoming deal, he soon addressed the next item on the agenda.

"How much progress has Alexa made in her attempt to recruit a batch of Journeyman Mech Designers for our Design Department?"

"Her progress was adequate before, but now that everyone believes that you have formed a connection with the Destroyer of Worlds, the amount of applications has skyrocketed. It has become much easier for her to sway the minds of freelancers who previously played hard to get. There is a definite sense that if they do not take this opportunity to get aboard our pirate ship, they might never be able to join us in the future based on their qualifications."

"Interesting. That sounds great. No matter what their motivations may be, as long as they pass all of our tests, their commitment to our clan shouldn't be too bad."

It would take at least a few days for Alexa to sort out all of the applicants and get to know the candidates well enough to make a final selection.

Ves did not want to rush this process. The Design Department would definitely depend a lot on their work in the foreseeable future. The LMC needed to refresh plenty of outdated product lines, and it could not afford to tarnish its reputation by releasing a mech that fell far below the standard set by the Fey Fianna.

Hopefully, Alexa would be able to recruit a bunch of ranged weapon specialists this time. Ves was tired of shouldering most of the responsibility for designing a set of decent weapon systems for his ranged mechs.

Master Xieliq Quan may be a bastard and a human traitor, but that did not detract from his amazing technological applications.

The power of his molecular disintegrators was amazing. Such weapons could be devastating in the right situations, and made Ves look forward to what else mech designers were able to develop.

"When will I meet with the CEO of Isthmus Manufacturing?"

"If nothing changes, you can initiate a virtual call in a couple of hours. It is still night at the planet where the mech manufacturer's headquarters are based."

"Do you have an updated intelligence packet on Isthmus Manufacturing?"

"Here you go, boss. We do not have the ability to collect first-hand information in the Rubarthan Pact, but there are numerous investigation and market research bureaus that specialize in this kind of stuff. We have managed to develop a much greater understanding of the company."

Ves already started to skim through all of the information.

The ownership structure of the company was interesting.

"It turns out that Isthmus is a public company."

That was not too unusual, but most mech-related businesses tended to be privately owned due to being founded by high-ranking mech designers.

Many serious mech companies had to offer increasingly larger proportions of stock to leading mech designers in order to retain their services.

Isthmus Manufacturing did not bother with this kind of business as it never put a lot of emphasis on developing in-house mechs. It was more than happy with catering to the large-scale production needs of other successful mech designers.

"The strongest advantage of Isthmus is its extensive networks of contacts and business partners." Gavin spoke in an admiring tone. "Ever since it started business over 300 years ago, it persistently scaled up its business activities while winning over increasingly larger and more capable business partners. It is a much bigger player in the old galaxy, but the branch in the Red Ocean has inherited the same business model as well as many long-standing contracts and business relationships. It enjoys a stellar reputation in the supply side of the mech community. It is never short on raw materials and its many friendships with Rubarthan government institutions allows it to gain exemptions and receive better treatment."

These were all key advantages. Isthmus Manufacturing was able to rely on its 300-year old heritage and its enduring reputation to easily open doors that would be closed to other companies such as the Living Mech Corporation.

Although Isthmus Manufacturing only focused on developing its networks in Rubarthan space, that was already a massive advantage.

Not only was Isthmus able to leverage the large amount of resources and services in territories where the LMC did not have a strong presence, but it was also able to open up a lot of new sales channels throughout Rubarthan space!

Of course, it went without saying that Isthmus had no ties with the Terran Alliance. Ves would not be able to make use of the company to expand the LMC's reach inside Terran space.

While Isthmus was in the process of strengthening its business networks in the Red Ocean Union, the LMC already built a decent foundation within this broad alliance.

One of the reasons why Isthmus Manufacturing was able to get along with many parties while still remaining publicly owned was because of its largest shareholder.

"The Impresario Principality owns the largest proportion of shares in the company." Gavin explained. "Much of the remaining shares are owned by half-a-dozen investment groups. It looks as if each of their voices are roughly equal, but the reality is that those institutional investments generally do not bother to manage their investments too actively. They are happy to sit back and take their money as long as business is doing well. This effectively means that the Impresario Principality is de facto in control of the company. It has appointed much of the board of directors and it is primarily interested in using Isthmus for non-monetary purposes."

To a Rubarthan principality, owning a large and influential company was about controlling a part of the economy and forming lots of strategically valuable relationships.

For example, the current situation could be regarded as an attempt to form a friendship with a mech designer who earned the favor of a powerful Rubarthan god pilot.

However, Isthmus was not a loss-making institution. Profits were vitally important to keep the remaining shareholders happy. Not even the Impresario Prince could upset these big investment companies if he wanted to maintain his reputation in the business community.



Gavin pointed out the strict standards set by the mech manufacturer. "As I have explained the day before, the business model of Isthmus Manufacturing is centered around mass producing large volumes of mechs in the most cost-effective manner. It relies heavily on economies of scale to lower overall costs and increase its profit margins. This is why it only focuses on a small selection of wildly popular mech models. In fact, much of its production is dedicated to producing mainstream mech models that have proven to be so popular that their original mech companies lack the ability to meet all of the rising demand. Such phenomena happen every once in a while. We are but the latest in a long list of mech companies that have managed to strike it big."

Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "All of that sounds nice, but that is only when business is doing well. What if a mech model starts to fade in popularity? Is Isthmus willing to accommodate a business partner that has entered into a slump?"

"Nope." Gavin immediately replied. "Isthmus is all business when it comes to profitability. The moment a mech model starts to lose momentum in the mech market is the moment where the mech manufacturer is ready to retool its production lines. Success is the main criteria that determines whether Isthmus is willing to fulfill our production needs. Anything that causes its production to fall below full capacity is wasted money as far as the Rubarthans are concerned. Unless you happen to be the Destroyer of World's secret great-great-grandson, the executives of the mech manufacturer won't wait long before they replace the LMC with more successful competitors."

"I see."

Getting in bed with Isthmus was a commitment as well as an opportunity. The large mech manufacturer could handle a lot of cumbersome but lucrative affairs in the Rubarthan Pact, but once the LMC started to falter, it would lose all of the borrowed production capacity and other business activities in an instant!

## Chapter 5595 Big Proposal

After several hours of handling numerous different affairs, the time had come for Ves to attend his first meeting with the CEO of Isthmus Manufacturing.

This was a crucial event and could directly determine whether the LMC could solve its immediate shortcomings related to production and market access.

"Meow..."

Lucky yawned as he rested on the desk. The gem cat had just devoured another meal of high-grade exotics that was worth as much as 50,000 MTA credits.

Ves would have balked at feeding his cat so much excessively overpriced materials in the past, but recent events had vastly improved the financial position of the Larkinson Clan.

Just the instant cash infusions from selling all of the licenses of the Fey Fianna models was enough to resolve all of his immediate money concerns!

"How are you doing, Lucky? How long will it take for you to repair all of your damage now that your stomach is a lot fuller than before?"

"Meow meow meow." Lucky eloquently explained as he lazily rolled onto his back.

"That's not much of an improvement."

"Meow." Tail flip.

Ves shook his head and ignored his cat. He examined his appearance one more time. Though he did not want to put any special effort into dressing himself up, he did not want to present a sloppy appearance either.

His assistant meanwhile had just completed a final briefing on all of the points that Ves needed to pay attention to if the talk started to turn to more substantive matters.

Ves roughly understood what the LMC needed the most in the short and medium term. Increasing production was the main priority. Quickly opening up the Rubarthan market was a nice benefit, but not an essential one. At most, the Larkinsons would do the hard work of setting up retail channels themselves.

"The Larkinson Clan should extend its tentacles in the Rubarthan Pact sooner or later." Gavin reminded his superior. "The issue is that we are short on time. Our clan and our subsidiaries already have their hands full with setting up branches throughout the Red Ocean Union. Our presence in the Krakatoa Middle Zone is particularly strong, but our footprint in the Magair Middle Zone is rapidly catching up. It will take at least a decade before we have established enough branches in the remaining middle zones of the Red Ocean Union."

Although the Larkinson Clan could already set up a few branches in the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact, it was impossible to maintain control over all of the branches if too many of them popped up in far-flung territories.

This meant that relying on a third party to handle the Larkinson Clan's business in Terran and Rubarthan space was a viable choice.

The biggest issue was how many concessions the Larkinsons needed to make to get a foreign company to do business in its home turf.

Gavin gave Ves a confident grin. "Our potential is high. Ever since you managed to get promoted to a tier 3 galactic citizen, you have started to form a high-level network with several notable human leaders. Hooking up with the Devos Ancient Clan and the Destroyer of Worlds has turned you into a leading figure that is worth befriending. Don't forget that. If the CEO of Isthmus Manufacturing starts to sound greedy, then do not hesitate to reject his proposals. As long as you continue to do well, we can just wait and increase our value. By that time, it will be Isthmus that will have to make concessions in order to gain our cooperation."

That took valuable time. Red humanity had entered a time of rapid change and upheaval. The faster Ves expanded his business operations, the more he was able to increase his influence in high society.

After all, once his bestselling products such as the Fey Fianna started to become ubiquitous throughout human space, it became a lot easier for Ves to gain a voice in how red humanity should be run!

Even if Ves was not interested in enacting policies himself, he at least wanted to stay in the loop. He had learned a lot of secrets as of late that made it clear that the upper echelon were holding back way more information than they disclosed to the public.

Ves despised it whenever people kept him in the dark. He hadn't even known about the possible approach of a God King-level threat from Messier 87!

"The time has come." Gavin announced. "Good luck with your talk. I will be standing out of projection range so that I can pass on all of the information that you need."

A secure communication channel started to form between two distant locations. The Red Comm Consortium that managed the galactic net had recently upgraded the speed, bandwidth and privacy of its elaborate network of quantum communication nodes.

The Red Ocean was much smaller than the Milky Way, and red humanity only occupied a part of the dwarf galaxy.

This made it much cheaper and more convenient to implement large-scale improvements to the communications infrastructure.

Any significant improvement made it easier to conduct business across interstellar distances. This was one of several ways the Red Two sought to stimulate the economy.

While Ves had certainly noticed the increase in bandwidth of any other useful services, he did not believe in the claims that the privacy and security of all remote connections had improved.

This was why he preferred to meet with important leaders in person. It was a lot harder for the mechers and other parties to eavesdrop on his conversations.

It was too bad that his schedule did not make it possible this time. If Isthmus Manufacturing anticipated a possible business deal with Ves in advance, the company would have dispatched an envoy to Bortele III months in advance.

This meeting was clearly arranged on short notice, but that was not a big deal to Ves and his Rubarthan counterpart. Neither of them cared too much about ceremony and tradition.

The office suddenly changed. The physical projectors created a new illusionary environment that resembled a well-lit reception hall.

The entire place was empty, giving Ves an opportunity to admire the tall ceilings, the beautiful company banners hanging from the walls and the hand carved statues of the most successful mech models produced by Isthmus Manufacturing.

The entire space was so large and spacious that Ves gained a strong sense of grandeur from the decor. Isthmus Manufacturing had steadily built up its scale of business with each passing generation.

The Great Severing may have cut its Red Ocean operations off from its parent organization in the Milky Way, but the foundation of the former was healthy enough to continue its business without any significant disruptions.

"Magnificent, is it not?" A new voice sounded from afar.

A man dressed in a purple pin-striped suit with the stripes flashing in staccato frequencies had passed through the main entrance.

"It is. Much of it appears to be new but handmade. That is a nice touch."

"We try. It never fails to impress mech designers such as yourself. Micky Tarukan. I am in charge of the operations of Isthmus Manufacturing. It is an honor to meet with the favored of the Destroyer of Worlds."

Ves smiled back as he shook hands with the physical projection.

"It is a pleasure to meet with you as well, but I have to warn you that I cannot comment on my relationship with the god pilot of your superstate. Please do not make assumptions about the nature of my ties to the Destroyer of Worlds."

"We understand. We shall not speak of it any further."

Both of them knew that the only reason this meeting came about was because Ves had gotten in touch with the Destroyer of Worlds. It was not realistic to ignore this major factor.

Now that the two had opened up a dialogue, they started to get to know each other a little more.

"Under my leadership, Isthmus has successfully overcome the crisis sparked by the Great Severing. Many of our existing product lines needed to be refreshed and replaced in the short term in order to maintain our profitability. We also had to work together with our extensive network of suppliers to ensure an abundant supply of hyper materials, particularly ones that are based on the most popular elements. Our success in solving all of these unanticipated problems has strengthened the cohesion of our company more than ever. We are also much better equipped to produce large quantities of hyper mechs no matter their material requirements."

Ves politely nodded as he listened to the 170-year old CEO.

He already researched the recent history of Isthmus Manufacturing, but it was always helpful to gain a better understanding of its leadership.

So far, Micky Tarukan had been remarkably approachable. This was a man who knew how to handle people like Ves. He had to be in order to be able to climb his way up to a chief executive position after starting from the bottom.

Back in Terran space, it was unimaginable for a relatively unremarkable Rubarthan businessman with a middle-class background to eventually be in charge of running a multi-billion MTA credit business!

"I have taken a look at the hyper mech models that your company is currently producing." Ves spoke as he studied one of the sculptures of a bestselling mech. "Many of the second-class models are quite decent, if limited by the timing of their development. You could have replaced them with more modern and updated hyper mech models. Aside from the obvious reason, Why did you take the initiative to approach the LMC all of a sudden?"

This question was a test. Ves wanted to know what Isthmus Manufacturing truly wanted out of cooperating with him and his mech company.

Mr. Tarukan clearly anticipated this sort of question. He chose to be frank and direct.

"There are two reasons. My patron, the Impresario Prince, has taken a personal interest in you. He has nudged our company into investigating whether there is an opportunity to do business with your Living Mech Corporation. Let me assure you that we are not being forced or ordered to explore business opportunities with you. After we have conducted an analysis of your business prospects,

we discovered that a partnership with your mech company can be highly lucrative. You supply the designs. We will handle production and all other downstream business activities."

"You are not our only choice." Ves said.

"That is true, but Isthmus is one of the few mech companies that not only has the capacity to mass produce hundreds of thousands of mechs, but is also willing to devote the majority of its production to third-party mechs. Many other mech manufacturers have locked in production for the mechs that they have developed in-house."

"That also makes it easier to collaborate with their mech designers." Ves retorted. "This will be especially helpful once I am ready to design first-class mechs."

"I advise you against cooperating with small and unreliable companies. They are not as experienced in catering to the needs of partners such as you. Their average production costs are also significantly higher." Tarokan shook his head. "We are willing to fabricate and sell as many mechs as we can if you choose to partner with us. If you agree to sign a long-term contract with us, we are even willing to reduce our fees by a small extent. We are also prepared to raise your priority in our business relationships. That means that if there is any available production capacity, the available production lines will be allocated to the production of your characteristic living mechs first as long as demand is sufficient."

That sounded incredibly attractive to Ves, but he tried his best to suppress his enthusiasm.

"That is a remarkably generous proposal. However, I expect that your company wants something in return."

The CEO's expression turned serious. "If you wish to obtain the highest level of treatment from our company, we would like to obtain exclusivity in this business. Allow us to be your sole authorized producer and seller of your products within the borders of the Rubarthan Pact. We have the contacts and the infrastructure to do this cheaper and on a larger scale than any other party. As long as your mech company agrees to do business with us on a permanent basis, we will always have your back whenever you require anything within Rubarthan space."

This was definitely a big proposal!

## Chapter 5596 The Seven Star Emperors

Ves continued to chat with Micky Tarukan about various related topics as he mulled over the enormous offer he received.

"The only taste of a first-rate superstate that you have experienced in person is the Terran Alliance. The Riston Territory governed by the Devos Ancient Clan may look rich and impressive to a foreigner such as yourself, but you do not understand the dark side that sustains Terran society."

Naturally, the Rubarthan CEO couldn't help but badmouth the Rubarthans.

Ves had heard plenty of criticism about the Rubarthans in the past when he lived and worked in New Constantinople VIII.

As an outsider, Ves had no horse in this race. Back when he grew up in the Bright Republic, both the Terrans and the Rubarthans pretty much appeared like distant superhumans to him and his family.

They were smarter, stronger and better than third-raters in so many ways that it was difficult to maintain the idea that they belonged to the same species as space peasants!

When Ves started going up in society, the distance between himself and the first-raters diminished at a rapid rate.

Now that he had reached a stage where his galactic citizenship actually overpowered the vast majority of mechers, fleeters, Terrans and Rubarthans, it should be all of these ordinary first-raters who should look up to him these days!

Yet... far too little time had passed for Ves to adjust his mentality and get accustomed to his current reality.

A part of him still retained the simple mindset of an ordinary citizen of the Bright Republic. Whenever he thought about the first-raters, he did not distinguish them by their individual differences, but tended to generalize them according to their many commonalities.

This was why Ves never really put much emphasis on the differences between the Terrans and the Rubarthans. He never really cared all that much about their many divisions and conflicts, which put him out of lockstep with many other members of upper society.

A man as clever and successful as Mr. Tarokan should have been able to deduce this laid-back attitude, but that did not stop him from propagandizing the superiority of the Rubarthans over the Terrans.

After all, Ves had never actually lived long enough in Terran and Rubarthan space to truly appreciate the cultural differences between the two major groups.

"The New Rubarth Empire which we stem from has a strong tradition of leadership and competence." The vigorous man touted. "We have adopted these tenets from the very beginning when the man who became the first Star Emperor successfully led a rebellion against the tyrannical Terran Empire and founded a new star nation during the early years of the Age of Conquest. Our founding leader and the heroes he managed to gather around him all worked together to ensure that the rot and abuses of the Terrans would never taint our great Rubarthan society. The fact that all 6 rulers that came after him managed to preserve these original values is a testament to our greatness."

Ves' expression turned skeptical. "No offense, but not all of the Star Emperors could equal the greatness of the Rebel Star. I'm pretty sure that the Restrained Star and the Disaster Star

"We do not deny the failings and the shortcomings of the Fifth Star Empress and the Sixth Star Emperor." Mr. Tarokan replied in a more subdued tone. "Criticism and reflection are key components of a functioning meritocracy. Not even our highest princes and star emperors can escape fault."

"Yet you Rubarthans still revere the Fifth and Sixth in the same way as the rest."

"I do not agree that the two aforementioned rulers have failed in their duties. They came into power during a time where the Age of Conquest had begun to show their cracks. They endeavored to keep the New Rubarth Empire together when internal and external sources of pressure threatened to tear apart our great nation. I do not think that anyone could have done better in their place. In fact, anyone else would have certainly done worse! The Disaster Star may not have been able to avoid

the inevitability of being remembered for the great humiliation of our star empire, but it was not his fault."

Every Star Emperor that managed to rule the New Rubarth Empire received a posthumous title that broadly described his accomplishments and policy focus.

The first Star Emperor was known as the Rebel Star for obvious reasons. He was often regarded as the greatest of them all. None of his descendants had managed to surpass his prestige and renown, though a few had come close.

He had fathered 37 descendants over his relatively long life, which was considered a lot over the time.

The large number of descendants and the many disputes surrounding the question of who should take over after their old man sparked an unexpectedly large and violent succession battle that ultimately set a new tradition for the New Rubarth Empire.

The second Star Emperor was known as the Constructor Star. He had taken the early foundation of the New Rubarth Empire and deepened it so that it would no longer be as shaky as before.

When it came to parenting, he did not show as much restraint as his great father. Due to the relative stability at the time, the Constructor Star had plenty of time on his hands, which he used to father over 133 descendants, thereby contributing to an even greater and bloodier succession battle than before!

The third Star Empress was known as the Conqueror Star. She also happened to be the first female member of the Rubarthan Imperial Household to ascend to the legendary Coldstone Throne.

She had taken advantage of the vast military buildup of her predecessor and led great warfleets to conquer vast amounts of territories from the alien races of the Milky Way. More star systems fell into the hands of the Empire during her reign than any other!

She was purportedly so eager to conquer new territories for her rapidly expanding empire that she 'only' managed to produce just 48 descendants.

The Fourth Star Emperor was known as the Proud Star. The conquests slowed down as the navies and the infrastructure of the New Rubarth Empire increasingly reached their limits. This caused the Fourth to put more emphasis on consolidation and building up all of the conquered planets.

In order to set himself apart from the Constructor Star, the Fourth decided to invest in the arts as well as strengthening the national identity of the Rubarthan people. Many people argued that the Empire had reached its peak on a societal level.

He had been so successful during his reign that he also managed to father 420 princes and princesses.

The Fifth Star Empress was known as the Restrained Star. She was the first ruler to gain a posthumus title that arguably held a negative connotation. The Age of Conquest was losing steam by that time, and the many flaws of unbridled conquest and reckless expansion of power became evident.

She attempted to make her own mark by restarting a lot of conquests, but many of these invasions often experienced various setbacks and delays. It ultimately became too difficult for the increasingly bloated and decentralized fleets to meet their ambitious targets.

Maybe all of the stress that she endured over her life caused her to produce just 19 descendants before she decided to call it quits. This was regarded as an especially pathetic effort at the time. Many Rubarthans even believed that the low number of descendants contributed to the calamity that happened afterwards.

The Sixth Star Emperor happened to be so controversial that he became known as the Disaster Star.

It was during his reign that the New Rubarth Empire had reached its greatest size, but also began to show so many cracks that they all broke in quick succession!

The dark days of the Age of Conquest had arrived. Economies crashed. Violent incidents took place at unprecedented levels. Entire military units went rogue or mad with power.

The disruptions and breakdowns took place across all of human civilization, so the New Rubarth Empire was not exempt from the prevailing trend.

Yet despite the 'best' efforts of the Sixth and many other Rubarthans, they ultimately failed to stop all of the disasters.

Their failings created an opening for other powers to fill the void.

This directly contributed to the rise of the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance!

The Big Two seemingly came out of nowhere, but they rapidly gained so much power that they succeeded in subjugating the two dominant star empires at the time!

Weakened by all of the disasters, genocides and defections, both the Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire had little choice but to admit defeat and agree to an incredibly devastating and humiliating treaty.

This was the greatest shame of the Rubarthans to this day. The Big Two forced them to give up all of their warships, their weapons of mass destruction, their rights as an independent star empire, their dignity and so much more.

While it could be argued that the Disaster Star unfairly ended up becoming the scapegoat for all of the calamities that took place during his turbulent reign, the New Rubarth Empire still managed to live on during the Age of Mechs, if much more diminished than before.

Perhaps his only clear 'success' was that he managed to produce 699 descendants. This had resulted in the outbreak of a much larger and livelier succession battle that oddly excited the Rubarthans so much that they had managed to pull themselves out of their collective slump.

The Seventh Star Emperor came into power as the Age of Mechs produced a new wave of optimism. Under the order imposed by the Big Two, humanity began to rebuild and reform its broken societies. The astronomic rise of mechs led to much more 'healthier' wars that were not only a lot more restrained, but also more entertaining!

Although the Seventh had not been responsible for initiating any great conquests, he had done much to promote initiatives that significantly increased the level of stability, investment and happiness of his subjects.



He undertook a lot of actions that reminded the Rubarthans of the Constructor Star and the Proud Star.

One of the critical reasons why he managed to succeed was because he had fathered so many descendants that few people had an accurate count!

With an estimated number of 8000 direct descendants, the Seventh produced more offspring than all of the other Star Emperors put together!

Although the amount of princes and princesses brought to life sounded excessive on every level, the Seventh made good use of all of his sons and daughters.

Each of them enjoyed the highest level of education as well as lots of unique opportunities that other people could only dream about.

Due to their bloodline and relation to the current ruler, these imperial scions also happened to be a lot more loyal and aligned to the sovereign.

The Seventh either appointed these princes and princesses to high positions, or allowed them to make their own mark after receiving a hefty amount of starting capital.

After thousands of direct descendants started to flood Rubarthan society, a huge quantity of private and public institutions of the first-rate superstate ultimately got caught in the grip of the currently reigning Star Emperor!

By controlling the princes and princesses that took charge of all of so many large corporations and government institutions, the Seventh had reached an unprecedented degree of control and centralization over his vast empire, thereby allowing him to improve the efficiency and governance of his own superstate!

It was a rather unorthodox ruling strategy that happened to produce the right results... for the time being.

No one really knew what would happen after the Seventh retired from the Coldstone Throne.

The succession battle that was bound to erupt at that time would probably produce an unprecedented degree of violence and upheaval!

In fact, a small preview of that was already taking place in the Rubarthan Pact in the present day.

Even though the 'succession battle' in the new frontier was a lot smaller in scale, none of the Rubarthans quite knew what to do during this time of uncertainty.

Chapter 5597 The Origin of the Larkinson Ancestor

"Your Larkinson Family has a Rubarthan heritage, which I am sure you are already aware of." Micky Tarukan stated. "We are not certain how much information your family or clan has retained about your ancestor."

Ves shrugged. "Our records are rather spotty about this. The colonization of the Komodo Star Sector resulted in a lot of chaotic battles and setbacks that caused many of the immigrants who came from afar to lose a lot of stuff. Whether deliberate or not, our founding ancestor never really bothered to leave much information behind about his old life. I don't blame him. The New Rubarth Empire had just managed to limp out of the dark days of the Age of Conquest."

The virtual call continued as Ves and Micky Tarukan began to talk more in depth about the distinctive traits of Rubarthan society.

It became clear that Tarukan not only wanted to partner up with Ves and the LMC, but also sought to pull the Larkinsons into the orbit of the Rubarthan Pact.

What better way to do so than to appeal to their shared heritage?

Even though the past held little relevance to Ves, he couldn't help but grow curious at what the Rubarthans managed to dig up about the Larkinson Ancestor.

"What do you know about his background and early life back when he lived in our superstate?"

"There are multiple accounts." Ves replied as he dug up what he learned from various sources in the Larkinson Family. "The record written by his wife states that our ancestor grew up as an ordinary Rubarthan citizen who grew up in a peripheral territory of the Empire. Due to all of the chaos and disasters that happened at the time, our ancestor could not escape the fate of being forcibly drafted into military service, especially when it became clear that he possessed a genetic aptitude of A-, which was much rarer at the time."

Mr. Tarukan smiled and made an encouraging gesture. "Does this record tell of what he has done after he has completed his military training?"

"Not much. It is likely that the Larkinson Ancestor did not take much pride in his service, so he simply said that he served as a mech pilot for a time before he got caught in unpleasant business that forced him to drop everything and flee in haste. By the time he reached the galactic rim, he had spent all of his savings and urgently needed to find work, which was why he went on to fight for the former Rubarthan pacifists that ultimately founded the Bright Republic."

"This record is notably short on details."

Ves shrugged. "Many Larkinsons speculate that the Larkinson Ancestor did not want to overwhelm his wife by telling her about the fading glories of the New Rubarth Empire. He married a woman who had nothing to do with the superstate and had no connection to the galactic center."

"That is understandable. Your ancestor likely sought to start a new life, not to relive his old one. What do other records say?"

"Another retelling paints a much more glorious picture of our ancestor. It says that he is a descendant of an old and powerful military family. Despite growing up in a rich and privileged environment, the family demands a lot from all of its descendants, so our ancestor was forced to excel in his training and studies. All of that paid off when he went on to have a distinguished career as one of the growing number of successful mech pilots during his time."

"If he was so successful, then why did he leave his family and state?"

"The story claims that the military family that our ancestor belonged to has lost a political struggle. Since he was no longer welcome in Rubarthan space, he got exiled and sent away to the furthest reaches of the galactic rim, both for protection and a form of punishment. It is said that as long as his descendants are successful enough, he may one day return to Rubarthan space and rejoin the family that he hailed from, assuming that any of its branches still managed to survive within the Empire to this day."

"That is an interesting version of his history." Tarokan remarked with notable interest. "It is remarkably more glorious than the previous retelling."

"That is probably because it came from his son." Ves replied. "Many Larkinsons born after cared a lot more about our ancestor's background and direct connection to the New Rubarth Empire. They never had the opportunity to live in the superstate, so they did not really live through whatever trouble and turmoil that took place over there at the time. Personally, I suspect that his son intensely regrets that he was born when his father had left one of the most powerful states. This is why he became obsessed with hyping up the amazing origin of his father."

The physical projection CEO of Isthmus Manufacturing turned and stared up at the large and tall banners hanging from the walls. "Pride is a powerful force. It can instill confidence and it can make us more connected to each other. I sympathize with the son. It is truly a shame for children to suffer the consequences of the missteps and accidents that have befallen their Rubarthan parents. Our superstate is not very tolerant of mistakes. It is necessary to hold this attitude in order to ensure that the best and most qualified Rubarthans have a chance to occupy the right positions in our society."

There was not much Ves could say to that. He agreed with the principle, but he was not quite certain whether the Rubarthan approach was the best possible outcome. A low tolerance towards failure brought its own fair share of troubles.

Ves shrugged. "There are more records within my family that present other versions of our ancestor's background. They are mostly variations of the first two stories, but they are also written by people who are even less directly related to him. Their reliability is a lot more suspect. In the end, none of the Larkinsons that came afterwards cared enough anymore. They were all born and raised in the Bright Republic and already considered it to be their true home. There was no point in retracing their history to the New Rubarth Empire because it is not only prohibitively expensive to journey back to the galactic center, but they don't have the necessary skills or value to earn a living in the superstate."

The Rubarthan CEO sighed. "Exile is never honorable. We Rubarthans take great pride in any of our successes, but we also hold great scorn to those who have failed or proven themselves to be incompetent. Each of us fear the possibility that this punishment will fall on us as well one day. The threat of it forces us to keep working hard and remain relatively honest in our positions. The greater the responsibility, the greater the punishment for doing poorly."

That was a much harsher social dynamic than in Terran space. Of course, that was mostly because many important positions had already been taken up by the wealthy and powerful descendants of the old clans. They were much harder to dismiss due to their notable backing!

"Whatever the Larkinson Ancestor has done in the New Rubarth Empire is ultimately irrelevant." Ves summed up his own feelings. "The Larkinsons have already moved on from the past. My clan has managed to build itself up by relying on their own efforts. Whatever illusionary ties to the New Rubarth Empire that we may have has played no role at all. I am fine with letting the history of the Larkinson Ancestor fade into obscurity."

Tarokan nodded in acknowledgement. "You have indeed done remarkably well by relying on your own merits. It is difficult to imagine that anyone else could have done nearly as well if they had taken your place. However, the records of your ancestor are not as obscure and difficult to recover as you may think. We have managed to dig up a number of records that have survived to this day."

They also include documents that used to be classified but are now languishing in our many enormous data archives. Would you like to hear our version of the early history of your Larkinson Ancestor?"

That was a big revelation. Even though Ves did not think that his ancestor had any bearing on his life, he could not hold his curiosity back.

It would be nice if he could solve this particular mystery.

"I do wish to hear it so long as I do not have to pay anything."

"Have no fear. This is completely free, Professor Larkinson. We only wish to remind you that you are truly a descendant who can trace his lineage back to our great superstate. According to multiple sources, your ancestor was indeed born as a common citizen. He originated from a fairly rural planet that has managed to escape much of the damage and tragedies that have befallen more important planets. When he became 10 years old, his A- genetic aptitude created a small sensation. He did not get absorbed by one of our public institutions, but instead entered an elite mech pilot training program organized by one of our long-standing military families."

That sounded rather odd. Ves had a feeling that he knew now why the stories of the Larkinson Ancestor's wife and son diverged so much from each other.

"So instead of serving one of the regular military branches of the Rubarthan state, he turned into a private soldier of a specific Rubarthan faction." Ves surmised.

"An elite soldier." Tarukan emphasized. "He even managed to break through and demonstrate great strength during his time in service, though we do not fully understand his strength level as the lavere scale and the precisely defined distinction between mech pilot ranks had not spread throughout our Empire at the time. What we do know is that his talent and combat prowess became recognized by the head of the military family. Your ancestor became a retainer and earned a considerable amount of favor from the family leader, who also served as a general in one of our new mech armies during this period."

Ves couldn't help but feel proud that his distant ancestor excelled so much in mech piloting.

It was no wonder that piloting mechs had always been one of the strong points of the Larkinson lineage.

"What happened next?"

Tarukan sighed again. "The transition to the Age of Mechs is a period of great upheaval and struggle. Many long-standing groups fell while many successful visionaries rose to take their place in our changing empire. Not even the Disaster Star could stop these changes because the old order had to break in order to make way for a replacement. The military family lost a power struggle. The general was executed for his failures. As one of his trusted retainers, your ancestor became a victim of circumstances and risked punishment as well. There was talk of putting him on trial in order to judge him on his alleged misdeeds."

"How credible were these charges?" Ves furrowed his brows.

"That is a difficult question to answer. The records are not quite clear, and it is obvious that the people who have written them are biased one way or another." The Rubarthan frankly replied. "You have to understand that law and order at that time had reached a low point. Humanity during the

Age of Conquest did not uphold nearly as many taboos as today. Let me say that it is generally understood that few soldiers were able to keep their hands clean during this difficult and chaotic period of human history."

Ves snorted. "It is no wonder that the reigning Star Emperor at the time eventually became known as the Disaster Star."

"Whether the charges are legitimate or not, your ancestor likely feared persecution, so he resolutely deserted from service and used up all of the remaining favors that he had left to smuggle himself to the galactic rim. It may be possible that he has been excessively paranoid when he decided to flee all the way to the furthest reaches of human space. It is highly doubtful that the victorious faction would have bothered to invest resources to track him down once he put sufficient distance between himself and the galactic center."

"I don't agree with that." Ves shook his head. "It's better to be safe than sorry. All has ended up well for him. I think he became happy again once he picked up his life in the Komodo Star Sector."

#### Chapter 5598 Ves the Big Mouth

Even though Ves knew that Micky Tarukan deliberately sought to manipulate him by exposing the true origins of the Larkinson Ancestor, it worked.

Ves inexplicably developed a stronger connection with the Rubarthans.

There was little rational basis for this connection. The New Rubarth Empire had produced a huge amount of exiles over the ages.

Few if any of them ever managed to return to where they came from, so it was generally understood that they could no longer call themselves Rubarthans from the moment they crossed the border.

To Ves, whatever drama and controversy his distant ancestor got caught up in was completely irrelevant to the Larkinsons who lived in the present day.

However, just knowing that his ancestor used to be a rather prominent and powerful mech pilot in the New Rubarth Empire caused him to be filled with a bit of pride.

The Larkinsons came from good stock.

Ves couldn't wonder what would have happened if the Larkinson Ancestor did not become implicated in the power struggle that caused the death of his patron.

Would the Larkinson Family be able to thrive in the New Rubarth Empire?

Would the Larkinsons find a way to excel in a much more competitive environment and rise up the ranks?

Would the family produce an oddball mech designer like Ves one day?

No one could say for sure. History took a very different turn at the time that completely closed off all of these possibilities.

Though Ves was ready to move on from this topic, he still wanted to obtain one more answer.

"What is the name of the military family that my father served?"

The chief executive smiled. He already anticipated that Ves would ask this question.

"Your father used to be a proud retainer of the old and long-established Moses-Sinclair Family. It has a long tradition of serving in our navy, but after the Big Two came to power and deprived our Empire of the right to field starships, the military family hastily embraced mechs. With that comes a need to find mech pilots who possess the right qualifications and training to pilot all of the newfangled machines. Fielding automated battle bots in Rubarthan space is an exceptionally poor idea as we have many technologies that can subvert them in seconds."

"So that is why the Larkinson Ancestor couldn't escape the fate of getting drafted?"

"Correct, professor. The scarcity of potentates with high genetic aptitudes has caused the Moses-Sinclairs to cast a wide net and conscript large quantities of young talents of civilian origins. Many different Rubarthan parties have done the same. Mech pilots used to be especially scarce in a time where many disarmed groups urgently needed to rebuild their armed forces in order to defend their interests during a time of transition. In my opinion, the Moses-Sinclair Family treated your father much better than many other employers at the time. I believe that it would have only been a matter of time before he married into their ranks due to his talent and contributions."

"You mean they are greedy to integrate his genes in the family bloodline." Ves made a clever guess.

"Our understanding of genetic aptitude was much more superficial during the early years of the Age of Mechs. The people who became introduced to mechs assumed that the ability to pilot mechs was much more dependent on good genetics than hard work. The reality has proved that the opposite is the case, but it has taken several generations before that has become clear."

Ves knew his history well enough to know that this was the case. He felt a bit more mixed about the Rubarthans when he thought that his distant ancestor had come close to integrating himself in a long-established Rubarthan military lineage.

Thinking about all of these what-ifs was fun and all, but that did not mean that Ves had suddenly reinvigorated his Rubarthan heritage.

He could play the same game with the Terrans. If he looked far enough back in history, the Larkinsons used to be citizens of the great Terran Empire. Every human could ultimately trace their heritage back to Old Earth.

No matter whether he traced his heritage back a few hundred years or a few thousand years, he no longer saw any meaningful distinction between the two. The Rubarthans should be just as foreign to him as the Terrans.

"Let's get back to business." Ves spoke as he just received a quiet transmission from Gavin. "My advisors have just mulled over the exclusivity deal that you have proposed. We are intrigued by the offer to take care of all of the Larkinson Clan's business in the Rubarthan Pact under the condition of exclusivity, but this is too heavy of a commitment for us to embrace right away. Deals like these are usually struck among parties that have already cooperated with each other for years."

Tarukan did not look too surprised at this response. "That is normally the case, but we are living under exceptional circumstances. The Age of Dawn has just begun and the introduction of the Hyper Generation has phased out many old mech models. Change has become a necessity and only those who can keep up with the rapid pace of progress can stand in the end. Isthmus Manufacturing has survived many generational shifts and understands best that the stars of yesterday may not shine as brightly the next day. We are constantly paying attention to the rise of the next stars, and you are

particularly promising for multiple reasons. It is entirely plausible for us to skip all of the unnecessary steps and cooperate earnestly as soon as possible. Both of us enjoy a high reputation in the business community, so there is little reason to mistrust each other."

That was true. Ves constantly insisted on maintaining a squeaky clean reputation, and that had often allowed the Larkinson Clan to receive special business opportunities.

Nonetheless, that did not mean that Ves was willing to extend a lot of trust to Isthmus Manufacturing.

"Reputation does not determine everything." Ves shook his head. "While I am willing to believe that you hold a lot of goodwill towards us, the same cannot be said for everyone else in your company. Even if that is not the case, this can always change in the future. You should know as well as I do that there is an enormous potential for abuse once you have struck an exclusivity deal with the LMC. The absence of competition within the territories of the Rubarthan Pact means that there is little pressure for Isthmus Manufacturing to correct its actions."

The Rubarthan business leader turned around and gave Ves a reassuring smile.

"If trust is not enough to believe in our sincerity, then we can negotiate on adding additional clauses to the contract. We are not requesting an exclusivity agreement because we want to limit your options and lock you in. On the contrary. We want to support you to the greatest extent because we believe that your work has unlimited potential. Letting us be your exclusive agent within Rubarthan space will give us the confidence as well as the proof that you shall entrust us to produce and sell your products across the mech markets of our colonial superstate. We are more ready to start expanding our production capacity once your next mech models have proven to be just as successful as your Fey Fianna."

It became clear that Isthmus did not want Ves to switch to working with other large Rubarthan mech manufacturing companies.

To the former, Ves was the equivalent of a cash cow!

Even if the odds were still fairly low, Ves had already begun to show traits that corresponded to Star Designers.

If there was even a 5 percent chance that Ves had the potential to advance to Star Designer one day, then it would have been more than worth it for Isthmus to make a lot of concessions just to partner up with such a powerful mech designer!

Of course, once Ves reached this exalted rank, he would gain more than enough clout and influence to break or renegotiate the original agreement, but why should he have to wait that long to change the terms of the contract?

If Isthmus thought that Ves already held a lot of promise, then the company needed to show that through concrete actions!

Gavin and the other advisors behind the scenes already told Ves that he could drive a far harder bargain in this situation! He just needed to be more assertive and stop Micky Tarukan from controlling the rhythm of this virtual dialogue!

"Let me give you a counteroffer." Ves bluntly said as he adopted a more aggressive demeanor.

"From what I can see, there should be many Rubarthan business groups that would be more than

happy to cooperate with the Living Mech Corporation. You are just the fastest of the bunch. While I appreciate your sincerity and your willingness to make a large bet on me, there is still a shortage of trust seeing as how we are both strangers with existing ties between each other. In order to ensure that your company handles our mech business properly in the Rubarthan Pact, my clan demands a minority stake in Isthmus Manufacturing. 20 percent and the right to appoint a director on your board should be enough to satisfy our needs."

Tarokan had too much control over himself to produce an outburst, but it was still very clear that he heavily disapproved of this counteroffer!

"What you are asking for is too much, professor! Isthmus Manufacturing is a publicly traded company, so there is nothing stopping you from buying stock from other traders. However, our company is so highly valued that you will have to raise at least trillions of MTA credits in capital to become a top 10 shareholder in our company. As promising as you may be, we have great doubts whether you are able to acquire so much capital. We can issue a more modest amount of stock to you pending the approval of our shareholders, but they should only be willing to give you a fraction of your previous quote."

That was peanuts. Ves was not interested in holding 1 or 2 percent of an important Rubarthan mech manufacturing company. He would only be able to passively earn dividends with such a tiny stake!

Ves shook his head. "I will never enter into an exclusivity deal with a company if I cannot exercise enough control. I would rather wait for the LMC to enter the Rubarthan Pact the old-fashioned way. Look, a 20 percent ownership stake may sound disproportionate to you if you take my present circumstances into account, but it will be regarded as a bargain a few decades later. My potential is so great that I have already received the recognition of multiple god pilots and Star Designers. I am probably the only tier 3 galactic citizen that is willing to do so much business with Isthmus. It is only fair to give me enough ownership for me to get invested in your fine company."

Ves tried his best to make it clear that he was more than willing to walk away from this opportunity if Isthmus did not oblige his requests.

So long as that was the case, Isthmus should have little choice but to make heavy concessions!

Tarukan responded with a strained smile. "You can name drop all of the tier 1 galactic citizens you want, but our proposal does not encompass them at all. There are many talented mech designers who possess unlimited potential. I can easily contact hundreds of them in the Rubarthan Pact. I admit that your prospects are brighter, but potential must still be realized in order to hold value. This is anything but guaranteed in a time of great change and upheaval. Just as the ancestors of your Larkinson Family experienced a rapid turn in fortune, your bright future might darken in an instant due to unforeseen circumstances."

That was a sharp blow. Ves grew a bit annoyed at the attempt to equate his own circumstances with that of the Larkinson Ancestor.

To hell with it. Ves initially wanted to act with restraint, but now he just wanted to beat Isthmus Manufacturing into submission!

Before he could put more thought into the idea, he quickly recalled the Novastella cat statue from his System space.



Emma's glow immediately started to spread around the projected hall. Noise and other artifacts increasingly became more visible as the spread of destruction energy had begun to degrade the Communication link!

Ves even injected a bit of destruction energy into Emma's spiritual fragment. This caused the cat statue to glow even brighter while exuding a greater sense of threat!

"You might not recognize my value as a mech designer who is destined to do great things, so how about this? Let me own a part of your company, and you shall have a new stakeholder who has befriended one of the great god pilots of your colonial superstate. I am not afraid to tell you that I am on speaking terms with the Destroyer of Worlds. Is that enough to convince you to give me a 20 percent stake in Isthmus Manufacturing?"

Chapter 5599 Rhinoceros Beetle

Once Ves had opened his big mouth, he immediately shifted the entire dynamic of this negotiation!

Ves did not want to scare Micky Tarukan away. The Rubarthan CEO displayed a decent amount of sincerity and truly sought to cooperate with the Larkinsons.

However, accepting the initial deal was an insult to Ves. It was only equitable if it applied to Ves in his current form.

What about the future? What if he advanced to the rank of Master Mech Designer? What if his products became even more popular?

Though the deal still remained lucrative to Ves if his mech models gained more popularity, he wasn't satisfied with getting a cut of all of the profits.

Through his years of operating in the frontier,, he had gradually learned that control and ownership was just as important as money.

A profitable venture that Ves did not control in one fashion or another was not a reliable source of income!

So long as every aspect of Isthmus Manufacturing remained under the control of other shareholders, then the company would always work towards satisfying the interests of other parties!

This looked like an exploitative relationship to Ves. He had no objections to such arrangements when he was still a small fry, but his status had changed a lot since his Apprentice and Journeyman days.

As far as he was concerned, Isthmus Manufacturing should feel lucky and honored to get in business with the LMC!

Ves refused to believe that the large and reputable Rubarthan company failed to make a proper calculus on his future value.

It was entirely reasonable for Ves to ask for a handful of shares in this situation.

Yet he did not want to obtain a token amount of shares. Owning 0.01, 0.1 or even 1 percent of the mech manufacturer mostly held a symbolic meaning.

If he wanted to enact any real change, then he had to work hard to persuade the other institutional investors to side with his plan, and that was an exponentially difficult ordeal that he would have to repeat all over again if he wanted to implement another measure.

Everything would change once the Larkinsons started to gain a 10 percent, 15 percent or 20 percent stake in the company.

Though it still fell far short of gaining a voting majority in the company, becoming a top 10 shareholder meant that the board of directors could no longer ignore the interests of the Larkinson Clan!

Ves would definitely face a lot less resistance if he wanted Isthmus to follow a new plan as the other big shareholders could not dismiss him as easily as before.

In short, there were many obvious reasons for Ves to be more assertive, but he had just taken an especially risky step!

He originally did not want to pull out the cat statue and boast about his ties to the Destroyer of Worlds.

While he could certainly see that his display had taken Tarukan aback, powerful leaders rarely responded well to intimidation.

Even if Ves was able to coerce a much more lopsided agreement out of the chief executive, what would other people think?

Micky Tarukan may be in charge of all of the operations of the large mech manufacturer, but he was ultimately just a lackey of the true owners and controllers of the company.

The people that Ves actually needed to win over were all of the parties that stood behind Isthmus Manufacturing.

He did not think that he could make this happen by showing off his totem. It was just a dormant object that only stored a lot of spiritual energy donated by Emma. That was hardly equivalent to a direct endorsement from the Destroyer of Worlds.

Even if the god pilot made a personal appearance and vouched for Ves, that did not necessarily mean that the shareholders would be willing to dilute their shares and reduce their ownership in a highly profitable company!

The New Rubarth Empire did not work like the Garlen Empire. The Rubarthan Pact might transition into a superstate run by warlords one day, but it had a strong tradition of imposing strict limits on god pilots.

It was unthinkable for a Rubarthan god pilot to swoop in and demand a company to issue trillions of MTA credits worth of stock only to pass them over for free!

Even if no one tried to stop such a massive transaction, Ves knew that as long as he resorted to this extreme measure, he would ruin most if not all of his good reputation and credibility in the business sector!

From that point onwards, he would incur losses and opportunity costs that eventually exceeded the relatively small gains he made in an earlier period!

If Ves wanted to make the deal more equitable and easier to stomach, he needed to offer Isthmus and its current shareholders a massive contribution that approximated the value of 20 percent ownership.

He just came up with the right idea.

He first stuffed the Novastella statue back into his System space as if he just wanted to show off a silly toy.

"Giving me a stake in your company will benefit us both." He said as he dialed back his aggressive tone. "This is because I am the best and only mech designer that can bring my customers - and by extension yours - a lot closer to one of your two most powerful guardians. Let me show you what I mean by that. I happen to have a completed mech design on hand that I was just using to fulfill a commission for another state. If you are able to buyout this commission, then I can easily adapt it to the extensive amount of second-class customers in your colonial alliance."

Ves proceeded to call up the latest iteration of the design of the Supremo Project.

In the hours after he concluded his impactful face-to-face meeting with the Destroyer of Worlds, he had already applied a relatively quick and simple upgrade and addition to his heavy artillery mech.

Since Ves only had to affix a new design spirit while making sure that her glow was put to good use in his commissioned mech design, he did not have to make any complicated technical changes.

He just had to refine the spiritual design a bit more while also adding new round types to the standard loadout. Compared to the previous set of kinetic and explosive projectiles, the updated ones contained a significant proportion of destruction hyper materials.

Though Ves had not tested or simulated the effects of all of these changes, he was convinced that the Supremo Project had become a lot more powerful and destructive than before!

The heavy artillery mech had been designed with ultimate firepower and devastation in mind.

Ves just lacked an offensive design spirit to enhance its firepower further. That no longer became an issue now that he dragged Emma into the mix.

Of course, Ves did not ditch its original design spirit. The fundamental premise of the Supremo Project still centered around its key gimmick, which happened to be especially useful in landbound combat.

As the large projection of the proud six-legged, beetle-shaped heavy artillery mech filled up the enormous entrance hall, the CEO fell silent as he examined the latest sight.

Micky Tarukan was a businessman by nature, but he studied enough technical subjects as well as the basics of mech design in order to earn the qualifications to run a major mech manufacturing company.

His eyesight was pretty good. He immediately estimated the size, mass, cost, performance, material composition and market appeal of the new machine.

"This is a landbound heavy artillery mech that is primarily designed for field operations." Tarukan expertly noted with a discerning expression. "The original commission that resulted in its development must have predated the Great Severing as it is most suitable for shelling hostile units and positions on land. After the Age of Dawn has begun, you have made adaptations that allow it to

become more effective when employed against alien forces. It can serve as a bunker mech, but its all-heavy armament is optimized for sieges. Its interception ability is poor due to the lack of energy or rapid-fire armaments."

Micky Tarukan did not dismiss the new mech design just because it started out as a product of the previous generation.

He started to circle around the design and stopped a small distance away from the front of the machine.

Due to the large and imposing rhinoceros beetle-inspired design, the Supremo Project boasted a large and heavy cannon that extended straight from the front of the mech frame!

It looked as if the entire heavy artillery mech was built around an exaggeratingly large and powerful gauss cannon. The machine had to be supported by six heavy legs that extended quite far from the torso in order to produce a stable firing platform.

The 4 heavy artillery cannons that extended from the shell-like back of the Supremo Project looked like afterthoughts in comparison.

It was not because they were weak. They packed quite a punch and would have appeared a lot more dangerous on a more reasonable heavy artillery mech design. Depending on the shells they loaded, the 4 heavy artillery cannons could demolish entire city blocks.

They just did not have any extreme properties that allowed them to catch up to the lethality of the main cannon.

The 4 explosive cannons were the Supremo Project's equivalent of secondary armament!

"Wait." Tarukan began to pick up other clues. "Your heavy artillery mech design is clearly your work. Your design style is too distinctive for me to miss. However, the selection and application of components and modules is much different than your clan's usual approach. It is much cleaner and more standardized. The degree of optimization of this mech design is noticeably greater than what I have observed from your Fey Fianna. You collaborated with a Master Mech Designer on this project. Combined with the information that you have supplied before, Master Decimus Horst of Davute must be the second lead designer of this mech design project."

Ves looked mildly impressed. It was not exactly difficult for other mech designers to figure this out, but the fact that a business executive managed to piece this together so quickly was quite remarkable.

"You are correct. The Supremo Project is originally a commissioned work that I was about ready to submit to the original client. I recently updated it after I had a meeting with the Destroyer of Worlds. I requested and received explicit permission from Her Divinity to apply an aspect of her great power onto any suitable mech designs. The Supremo Project is the first but certainly not the last that will benefit from her generosity."

The chief executive clearly gained a lot more interest in the Supremo Project after hearing this revelation.

"This mech design..."

Ves manipulated the projection to create a better view on its imposing cannons. "I can promise you that whenever the Supremo Project opens fire with its armament, the mech will unleash an attack that is magnified by a minute amount of power bestowed by the Destroyer of Worlds. Do not underestimate this minor contribution. Her involvement can substantially amplify the firepower of any attack, most particularly the explosive shells."

Even though the mech only had four heavy artillery cannons, they should easily be able to inflict as much damage as six cannons or more with the help of Emma!

"For what purpose did you present this mech design to me?" Tarukan asked. "This is a private commission. You are likely breaching your contract by revealing it to an uninvolved party."

Ves smirked as he did not take this warning seriously in the slightest.

"Who says you will remain uninvolved? If I am being honest, the original set of commissions that I have agreed to fulfill with a certain state has become outdated. Too much has changed since I signed the original agreement. I have long been thinking about renegotiating this annoying contract, but now that you are here, I have a better idea. I want you to make a deal with Davute related to my commissions. If you can persuade Davute to transfer them to Isthmus Manufacturing with my permission, you will gain the right to fabricate and sell the Supremo Project to many eager citizens of the Rubarthan Pact. Are you interested, Mr. Tarukan?"

#### Chapter 5600 Private Product Reveal

The Supremo Project was unlike any other second-class heavy artillery mech design that Micky Tarukan had seen before.

In fact, no Rubarthan had ever seen such a mech before!

On the surface, the Supremo Project looked like a typical heavy artillery mech that was based around the one-huge-gun mech concept.

These were mech designs that attempted to skirt the line of the MTA-imposed rule that restricted the caliber of ranged weapons.

The general rule of thumb was that weapon systems were only allowed to be as big and powerful so long as they could still be independently carried by a single mech.

This restriction chafed people a lot during the early years of the Age of Mechs. Many of the people who were alive at the time still recalled the awesome firepower of warships.

A standard mech could never come close to matching the firepower of the main cannon of a battleship, but that did not stop mech designers from attempting to close the gap as much as possible!

All sorts of silly mech designs emerged as a consequence that amounted to little more than a big cannon with a mech body vaguely attached to them. From mounting the oversized cannons on their backs to literally turning them into spines, the ultra-heavy cannon mechs did manage to live up to their promise and bestow immensely strong firepower to the mech forces that fielded them in battle!

Unfortunately, restricted mech combat abided by a completely different set of rules than traditional unrestricted warship combat.

Big guns did not deliver the overwhelming suppression and the easy victories as their promoters envisioned.

The mechs that carried them were too undersized relative to their enormous cannons. This caused them to lose a huge degree of flexibility.

Their ultra-heavy cannons possessed an exceedingly slow firing rate. Their massive frames moved too slowly on the battlefield. They were easily damaged. Their main weapon systems became prone to malfunctions. The most stressed components wore down far too quickly.

While the ultra-heavy cannon mechs barely functioned adequately when employed as a semi-fixed defensive installation, they were terrible when used in attack maneuvers.

Any adversary could easily work around their many obvious weaknesses and take advantage of their complete lack of flexibility and adaptability to target their vulnerabilities!

They were especially vulnerable to light mechs. Any light skirmisher could easily advance while evading the slow-firing attacks from the unwieldy ultra-heavy cannons.

Once the light skirmishers came close, then they could easily avoid the firing arc of the single big weapon and dismantle the vulnerable heavy mechs from the rear or any other unprotected sides!

Of course, the forces that employed the ultra-heavy cannon mechs always made sure to provide their expensive babies with adequate escorts, but that brought its own host of issues.

When a hostile force fielded a more reasonable and flexible roster of heavy artillery mechs, it became easy to eliminate the ultra-heavy cannon mechs by relying on quantity as opposed to quality.

It was impossible for a small number of ultra-heavy cannon mechs to eliminate a much larger quantity of regular heavy artillery mechs!

The latter had a lot more depth and redundancy. They could also reposition themselves much easier after they fired a salvo, allowing them to avoid counter-battery fire a lot easier.

In short, there were many reasons why the prevailing pattern of heavy artillery mechs ultimately ended up as a relatively balanced configuration with multiple reasonably-sized integrated cannon weapons.

Any mech designer that deliberately deviated from the market standard better had a good reason behind this risky decision.

"The demand for heavier siege weapons has increased by a large extent after the start of the Age of Dawn." Micky Tarukan remarked. "Isthmus Manufacturing along with many of our competitors have observed that mechs armed with weaker and lighter weapons are selling in much less quantities than before. The demand for heavier mechs that are armed with larger weapons has increased, but the market has yet to demand mechs as unbalanced as your Supremo Project."

Having designed the heavy artillery mech in cooperation with Master Decimus Horst for many months, Ves had gained a much more comprehensive understanding of this mech type.

"That is because the customer base is lagging behind the rapid changes in circumstances. They are still stuck in their own mindsets. There is nothing wrong with more traditional heavy artillery mechs. The latest iteration to my famous Transcendent Punisher model still adheres to this pattern.

However, I think that there is a legitimate place for ultra-heavy cannon mechs in many mech forces, particularly the less well-equipped ones that cannot afford to employ transphasic mechs on a wider scale."

"Is the Supremo Project a transphasic mech?" The Rubarthan chief executive asked.

Ves shook his head. "Strictly speaking, it is not. I designed this machine with the economic conditions and resource endowments of the Colonial Federation of Davute in mind. The second-rate state used to enjoy the backing of a consortium of first-rate powers, but that relationship ended with the Great Severing. Master Horst and I took great effort to make it as affordable as possible while still preserving much of its key strengths. The estimated production cost comes at just 4 MTA credits. I have no idea how much Davute intends to charge for this product, but I imagine that it should hover between 4.7 to 6 MTA credits depending on how much it wants to subsidize its own domestic mech forces."

The Supremo Project was a bit more expensive than the Standard Fey Fianna, but the new drone mech was already expensive when compared to other medium mechs.

As far as heavy artillery mechs were concerned, it was not unusual for them to be priced at 5 or even 6 MTA credits. They were more expensive because they used up a lot more materials and because it was worth it to obtain so much firepower.

When Micky Tarukan reminded himself of the unverified but highly consequential claim that the Supremo Project was able to unleash greater destruction with the support, however slight, of the Destroyer of Worlds, then the heavy artillery mech was definitely a bargain at this price range!

Every second-class customer would instantly flock to every available retail channel and purchase at least a few units in order to experience the mighty god pilot's power for themselves.

Tarukan feared that a lot of Rubarthans consumers would especially go mad once this product finally entered the market!

It did not matter if smaller or more restricted mech forces could not accommodate such a large, heavy and expensive artillery mech. Just their ostensible connection to one of their most powerful guardians was enough to justify their purchases!

As the head of Isthmus Manufacturing continued to examine the projected mech design from every angle, he tried to pick out every detail that could increase or decrease the sales potential of this new mech product.

Many of the old objections still existed, but there were even more compelling reasons to buy this mech.

Tarukan took another look at the main cannon that was so large that nobody could possibly mistake the silhouette of the Supremo Project from a distance.

The dark brown coating and the absence of any clear markings caused the heavy artillery mech to look a lot more frightening than it should. Its shapes and contours already conveyed so much threat that there was no need to dress it up with any further artistry!

Such a mech... was exactly what red humanity sought in their fight against the native aliens.

The Supremo Project was not suitable to be deployed by itself, but it would work wonders in a proper combined arms force where it could pummel enemy warships under the protection of many supporting mech units.

"How is its estimated performance against alien warships?" Tarukan asked directly.

"I can transfer you a bunch of reports that contain a lot of calculations and estimates, but they are already outdated due to my most recent changes." Ves responded. "At longer ranges, the Supremo Project's 4 heavy artillery cannons are unable to hit anything unless the target is big and stationary. However, that is not a big problem because the super-heavy high-velocity hyper gauss cannon is more than powerful enough to make up for this shortcoming. Its firing rate is slow, but each super-heavy round is accelerated to a blazing speed with the help of the exceptionally long barrel. That makes every shot both fast and powerful, so much so that a direct hit on any typical mech can literally cause the poor machine to explode into pieces!"

Micky Tarukan could believe in this claim. The huge size and other obvious characteristics of the main cannon better be able to one-shot a mech, or else it wasn't worth the trouble!

"The main cannon is clearly more suited for direct or low-angle fire in landbound combat. It can function as a suitable long-range siege weapon in spaceborn combat. The heavy artillery cannons that can launch explosive shells should have much lower muzzle velocities. That should only make them suitable for mid-range combat in space battles."

Ves nodded. "That is true. The heavy artillery cannons can load all sorts of standard shells for its caliber, so every mech force has a lot of choice on how to employ them. My favorite is to load them with spaceburst shells that can produce wide-area explosions at set distances. That should be reasonably effective in destroying dense formations of small craft or hitting fast-moving targets."

That sounded useful, but the premise was that the enemy small craft and warships moved close enough to the human starships that carried the Supremo Project in their bunkers.

As long as the range extended past a certain point, the horribly slow muzzle velocities of the traditional artillery cannons would make it so that they could never hit any reasonably moving target in space!

Even so, this was an acceptable tradeoff. The Supremo Project was really all about the big fat gun that was mounted on its front.

The more Micky Tarukan looked at it, the more he became attracted by its possibilities.

How much damage could a mech company comprised entirely of this exaggerated heavy artillery mech inflict?

Such a force might not excel at inflicting wide-area destruction, but it could accurately strike heavily fortified targets with the force of a hammer of god!

Another idea came to mind.

"This cannon... is it capable of firing at orbital targets from the ground?"

Ves grinned. "Yes. That is one of the new objectives that Master Horst and I tried to fulfill. All of the calculations bear this out. The early prototypes have also confirmed this capability. The best way for the Supremo Project to threaten enemy warships in orbit is to load its main cannon with



transphasic rounds. This allows the solid projectiles to partially phase through the air, effectively negating a lot of air resistance that ordinarily saps a lot of speed and force. It may be an expensive choice, but with the targeting guidance from Ylvaine, the Supremo Project is capable of making every shot count!"

This made the Supremo Project even more attractive than before! It could function as a legitimate planetary defense unit that could safely bombard enemy warships that had managed to approach a human-occupied planet.

In many cases, enemy warships could easily ignore the threat from the surface so long as the humans kept sticking to their own version of small craft. Mechs simply did not possess the punch needed to inflict significant damage onto shielded warships that leisurely hovered in orbit.

That could change once a heavy artillery mech like the Supremo Project started to get stationed across many different planets!

The expense would be great, but the resources needed to field a hundred copies of this radical heavy artillery mech were far lower than the resources that the aliens invested in their own warships!

So long as the Supremo Project could down one enemy warship, then they had already paid for themselves!

The deterrence value alone was already precious enough. If the aliens decided to postpone or slow down their planetary assaults upon detecting large quantities of Supremo Project mechs, then that granted the latter an even greater strategic significance!

Micky Tarukan made a decision.

Isthmus Manufacturing could not let this powerful new mech design slip past its fingers!