

Mech 1561

Chapter 1561 Thorny Opposition

The next morning, Gloriana traveled to the Mech Nursery early in order to finish her examination of William's state.

Her specialty demanded that she know as much about a mech pilot as possible. It wasn't enough to learn their physical state. She also needed to gain an understanding of their piloting skills, mental state and so on. All of that required a lot of time to investigate.

On this, Ves didn't want to wait. It wasn't as if they were performing a peer-reviewed study that needed to adhere to academic standards. He was in a hurry to enact his spiritual treatment plan.

If he succeeded, then he could immediately move on to the next step of his custom mech project!

If he failed, then he would simply shake his head and accept this outcome. He didn't feel the need to learn too many lessons from a possible failure because it was doubtful if Ves would mess around with people's minds like this again.

Most mech pilots weren't cowards, after all! Ves could scarcely imagine the need to perform the same treatment on Larkinsons!

"I'm not really sure if I'm even supposed to be messing with people's minds in the first place." He quietly muttered as stepped out of his mansion.

A lot of Larkinsons were leaving for work or school at this time. Large shuttles and aircars flew out of the Cloud Estate every minute.

The sight of all of this traffic further emphasized how many Larkinsons actually lived on his property.

He still scratched his head at how easy the Larkinsons persuaded to turn his 'private' estate into a 'family' estate.

"Well, it's not as if I object to this change."

Ves truly enjoyed the company of the Larkinsons. No matter how old or young they were, being surrounded by family always brought him joy. As long as they didn't solicit him for money or favors, he didn't mind their company.

"Meow." Lucky happily climbed on his shoulder and looked out at the ascending vehicles.

"Am I not enough for you, Lucky?"

"Meow meow."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. I'm not always available if you want to play."

The kids had all taken a liking for Lucky and Clixie. Not only that, some of them also owned their pets. Animals formed an entire population group at his estate!

"Well, let's head to work."

Ves and Lucky boarded their own shuttle which brought them to the Mech Nursery. Upon arrival, Gavin surprisingly awaited their arrival at the landing zone.

Usually, Ves met with Gavin in his penthouse office.

"What brings you here, Benny?"

"Before you head inside, I want to show you something just outside the premises." His assistant answered.

Gavin led his boss out of the landing zone and towards the main entrance of the manufacturing complex.

The closer they approached, the more Ves began to hear the noise and cacophony of a crowd.

Once they reached the enormous but largely symbolic swing gates, a mob of protestors were screaming and chanting at the entrance. Some of them even held electronic placards that projected signs in the air!

Ves read some of the words projected above the heads of the protestors.

CEASE BRAINWASHING US!

VES LARKINSON IS A WAR CRIMINAL!

DO NOT BUY LMC MECHS!

THE DEVIL TONGUE IS EVIL!

THE LARKINSONS HAVE SHOWN THEIR TRUE NATURE!

BANISH THE DEVIL TONGUE BACK TO WHERE HE BELONGS!

Ves grimaced at the sight. He didn't miss the group of journalists capturing the protests with their floating recorder bots. Who knew how many of his customers would watch the footage of the protests by the end of the day!

Since Ves didn't hide his approach, the protestors on the other side of the gate soon noticed his presence!

"Begone, you devil!"

"Go poison the minds of the Ylvainans, you traitor!"

"My father died because he piloted your crappy mechs!"

"We won't let you take over our state! We are on to your nefarious plan to brainwash everyone into worshipping you! You may have already turned the Ylvainans into your slaves, but it's not too late for us!"

Ves snorted when he heard that last accusation. Did they think he was another incarnation of Prophet Ylvaine? He could care less about their lives!

Just as Ves stepped up to teach them all a lesson, Gavin held his arm and pulled him back. "Don't, Ves! I didn't bring you here to argue with the protestors."

Ves frowned. "Why not?"

"No amount of arguing will change their minds. If you step forward and open your mouth, the only thing you'll accomplish is realizing their worst fears. Even if you manage to disperse the crowd, the people who weren't present here would state that your Devil Tongue was at work!"

"That's ridiculous!"

"That's the public perception that your critics have formed! I know it's rather abrupt for you to be confronted with these protests, but they are much larger than the mob you see before you. Trust me, we've tried to stamp them out many times, but there are too many people who bought into the conspiracy theories or gave in to their worst fears."

Ves only vaguely learned of the existence of the movement against his mechs during his previous tour.

He suspected that the movement initially started when a couple of competitors and critics banded together to depress his success.

Gavin explained the latest developments to Ves.

"We used to treat the opposition to our mechs as a serious nuisance. That was back when we still sold Blackbeaks, Crystal Lords and Aurora Titans. All of this changed when we published the Desolate Soldier. Our mechs have begun to proliferate in Bentheim, which means that a lot more people get exposed to our mechs in one of the busiest planets in our state!"

The ubiquity of Desolate Soldiers and their strong effects on people amplified everyone's worries. The protest movement gained a significant impetus when it became clear that the Desolate Soldiers would continue to spread throughout the Bright Republic and beyond!

After a bit of thought, Ves shook his head.

"To be honest, I am not unsympathetic of their concerns." He said. "My Desolate Soldiers can be rather heavy-handed when it comes to influencing other people. That doesn't change my mind that my work is necessary. The fact that more and more institutions have adopted my mechs means that we are fulfilling the needs of our customers."

"That's all and good, boss, but the protestors don't agree."

"So what do you suggest we do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"It's not wise to engage the protestors directly. We'll be forced to fight on their terms if we open up a dialogue." Gavin clarified. "Therefore, it's best to leave them alone and work behind the scenes. We should let our supporters and our allies do the dirty work of pushing back this protest movement."

Now that Ves thought about it, this was his original plan. His initial plan was to make his mech design indispensable to the states. As long as the people in power needed his mechs, they would inevitably support his business efforts.

There was no way the Bright Republic would allow its own citizens to ruin a mech it appreciated!

However, even if Ves believed the government and other supporters would back him up, there was no way they single-handedly impose their viewpoints on everybody.

Ves crossed his arms while furrowing his brows. "It's difficult to allay people's fears towards my mechs. The fear and stigma against brainwashing is deeply rooted in every human's mind. I can't help it that my mechs strays uncomfortably close towards

brainwashing. Even the MTA has acknowledged that my mechs are capable of affecting other people's minds."

That wasn't necessarily bad in itself. Anything could influence a person's mind. For example, if Ves wanted to make people react strongly to him, then he could just strip off all his clothes and parade his naked body in front of the protestors and the press!

Of course, such an act was clearly more explainable. The difficulty that he and the LMC faced was that they didn't really have a good explanation of how his mechs were able to influence people's mentalities.

His mechs didn't release any smells or pheromones.

His mechs didn't transmit subliminal flashes of light that induced certain moods or behaviors on people.

His mechs didn't remotely interface with every bystander in the vicinity.

Settled science couldn't come up with a solid explanation for the unique phenomenon surrounding his mechs.

Mech designers and many other experts all came up with their own theories. Ves definitely believed that a number of them managed to get close to the truth and guess that psionics may be involved.

As much as a part of him wanted him to step forward and confront the protestors with what they were doing, Ves merely scoffed and turned around.

"Let's go, Benny. These ignorant people aren't worth my time."

Gavin followed alongside him. "For a moment, I thought you wanted to lash out at the protestors."

"I considered it, but I wouldn't gain anything aside from venting my frustration. As a mech designer, I've been taught to let my work speak for themselves. I still believe that is the right approach here. Once the sandmen are battering the Bright Republic in earnest, I'll watch closely to see how many people still object to my Desolate Soldiers and all of its variants."

Ves didn't consider himself to be on the same level as the idlers who apparently had enough time on their hands to picket the entrance of the Mech Nursery all day.

Where was their sense of duty?

A devious idea came to mind.

"Benny, please instruct the Living Sentinels to place some Desolate Soldiers in the vicinity of the protestors."

"They won't like that, boss."

"I don't care. If they step back, I want a Desolate Soldier to step forward. Do that until we succeed in chasing them away from our premises."

It looked bad if protestors continued to picket in front of the Mech Nursery. Once they had been driven away, the journalists would quickly cease to broadcast their footage, because protesting in front of nothing did not make for a good news segment.

Once Ves entered his headquarters and entered his main office, he sat down on his comfortable chair and began his work day.

Since Gloriana was still busy with examining William Urbesh, Ves still had to wait until the late afternoon to enact his spiritual treatment plan.

The wait was killing him. He was so eager to begin his experiment that he barely paid attention to the matters that came up to him today.

The only instance where he paid more attention was when Crindon visited his office for a private meeting.

After making sure that jamming was in place, Crindon finally spoke.

"I've performed a preliminary investigation on the LMC. While I've only studied the upper management of the company so far, I've already identified around thirty moles in our headquarters."

While Ves knew that not every employee was clean, hearing that thirty of them were sneakily passing off information about Ves and the company to others was a heavy blow.

"Who are these moles reporting to, Crindon?"

"Some of them are working on behalf of Flashlight and Spotlight. Others appear to be transmitting internal data to competing mech companies. However, I haven't been able to determine the ultimate recipient in over half of the cases. The people and organizations involved are too careful to slip such a thing."

Ves grabbed Lucky and passed his pet over to Crindon.

"Meow?"

"Try and investigate with Lucky's help. He possesses a powerful CFA hacking system."

"This will help, but not as much as you think. Spies are exceedingly careful about exposing their networks and systems." Crindon said as he held Lucky in his arms. "I'll see what I can do, though. What do you want to do to the informers that we have identified?"

Ves shrugged. "Keep the ones who are working for the government, but find a way to kick out the rest."

"It may be prudent to keep known spies around, if only to track what data they are interested in passing along."

"You can determine the best course of action for yourself. I trust in your judgement."

"Thank you, sir. I'll do my best to minimize the damage they can do."

In truth, Ves couldn't be bothered with addressing this problem either. He knew that no matter how many spies and informers they exposed and removed from the company, others would inevitably take their place.

Some enemies simply couldn't be beaten in a straight fight!

Chapter 1562 Frightening Experiment

Time continued to pass until the workday was almost over. Ves left his office and descended to the underground lab.

He walked up to Gloriana and exchanged a kiss.

"Are you done with William now?"

She nodded. "I've collected a sufficient amount of data. You can pick him up and do whatever you want with him. I have one request."

"And that is?"

"Can I come with you? From what I've studied, his fears are deeply rooted in his mind. The Rim Guardians haven't been able to remedy this problem, so I'm very curious to see how you plan on treating William's condition."

"Don't you remember my specialty?" Ves turned towards Gloriana and tapped his head. "While I mostly work with mechs, I've also worked on people. It's just..."

"What's the problem, Ves?"

"The treatment plan I came up with isn't exactly proper. It's not as if I can medically-sound study as a mech designer. What I plan to do is not for the squeamish."

She looked a bit concerned, but quickly resumed her smile.

"I insist on accompanying you. If we want to increase our synergy, I need to see what you are capable of. I promise I won't object to anything you do no matter how ugly it gets. I can already guess that whatever you intend to do to William won't exactly be pretty."

Ves thought about it for a moment. "Okay. I'll allow you to witness my operation as long as Melody and your bodyguards keep their distance."

He waved towards the people he mentioned. Ever since Gloriana started working here, her hounds were never too far away.

To be honest, Ves detested their presence in his sanctum. Their presence constrained his impulses. He always felt he was being observed while he was performing his work. Activating local jammers could only do so much to mitigate the feeling of being stared at while he was doing something related to his specialty.

Gloriana mulled over his suggestion.

"Ordinarily, it will be difficult for me to keep Melody and my guards out of sight, but I think I can convince them to back off this time. This entire floor is highly isolated. No one is here except us, our cats and our guards."

When Gloriana approached Melody to issue her request, the two women held a brief argument before the assistant reluctantly acquiesced.

"It worked, Ves!" She returned and embraced him for a moment. "Will you show me what you can do now?"

"I will." He replied with a smile before turning to his bodyguard. "Nitaa, please bring William to one of the enclosed chambers."

Nitaa wordlessly nodded and dragged William to the isolated testing chamber. Ves originally had it built in order to perform dangerous experiments.

Though initially meant to contain dangerous explosions and the like, the enclosed chambers could also be used to contain recalcitrant test subjects.

Both the testing chamber and accompanying observation room were fully isolated and enclosed from the main lab hall.

This meant that William's screams and convulsions shouldn't reach the guards standing outside.

As Ves closed up the chamber and observation room, Nitaa stood right outside to make sure that neither Melody nor the Glory Battalion would barge in without warning.

"You seem to trust your bodyguard a lot." Gloriana remarked as she helped Ves activate the right observation equipment.

Gloriana hadn't let off this section when she replaced his old equipment with her own!

"She's a Kinner, after all. They're more trustworthy than any guards I can hire from the Republic."

It took some time for them to get the right setup. Their cats huddled together on top of a tall machine and looked down on their owners.

Once Ves was finally pleased, he looked out at the transparent wall where William helplessly banged against the surface.

"Let me out!" William screamed as soon as Ves opened up a communication channel. "What are you doing to me?! Not even the Rim Guardians treated me so roughly! I want to leave! I want to go home!"

"You want to leave? You want to go home?" Ves grinned as his eyes twinkled at his test subject. "I'll only let you go when you grow a spine and advance to expert candidate! Until then, you'll stay under my thumb!"

Ves cut off the comm channel and pressed a button.

A partition formed at the other side of the chamber. A floating platform carrying a very large object entered before the gap disappeared.

Nothing else happened as Ves did not activate any other commands.

A single minute passed without anything taking place. The cats started to yawn and lick each other while Gloriana puzzlingly looked into the test chamber.

Eventually, she couldn't hold in her curiosity. "Isn't that the dangerous Ancient Sarcophagus you've showed me back then? Why did you bring it into the chamber all of a sudden? Is that part of your treatment plan?"

"Not exactly." Ves tentatively admitted. "My real treatment won't begin yet. This is just a separate experiment to satisfy my curiosity. I want to see how a scaredy-cat like William reacts to an object that is capable of inducing fear from a distance."

Ordinarily, it took some time for the spiritual entity trapped in the red coffin to worm its way into the mind of someone else. Ves hoped that Nyxie would hurry up this time seeing as how he brought its coffin very close to a human.

Even though he didn't do much aside from checking the instruments every now and then, he constantly kept his spiritual vision peeled.

He wanted to see whether Nyxie was capable of influencing William without direct spiritual contact.

As twenty minutes passed, William gradually began to grow more and more panicked. The mech pilot kept banging at the surface of the transparent wall while screaming to be let out.

Ves already reactivated the comm channel but kept its volume low.

"This crystal thing is creeping me out, Mr. Larkinson!"

"W-Wait, is there a body inside? Glk!"

"Please let me out! I can't take it anymore!"

"Ahhh! This coffin! This coffin! This coffin!"

While Ves keenly observed William's spiritual potential for any changes, Gloriana began to frown more and more.

"What is the point of this experiment, Ves?" Gloriana sternly asked. "All I'm seeing is needless suffering. Our instruments aren't picking up anything meaningful aside from increasing levels of stress and panic in the poor fellow you've trapped inside the chamber."

Ves briefly turned around to face his girlfriend. "You promised not to interrupt me. Right now, I'm in charge of this session. Everything I'm doing is for a reason."

His unusual intensity took Gloriana aback. She had rarely seen him react so sternly towards her. Usually, he was much more accommodating to her!

Of course, she quickly realized that many mech designers were like this when they engaged in something related to their specialties.

"I'm sorry, Ves. You can continue. I won't interrupt you again."

As Ves turned back to directing his spiritual vision towards William's head, Gloriana continued to frown at Ves and the testing chamber.

No wonder her boyfriend didn't want her to bring in any of her guards. What Ves was doing right now clearly crossed a lot of boundaries!

Yet.. Gloriana couldn't bring herself to feel repulsed. She knew that Ves was following his passion.

While Gloriana dreamily gazed at him, Ves kept his attention on William.

At this point, his panic approached the limit of what he was able to bear. If this simple experiment kept going on, then William would soon scare himself to death!

"I guess this is enough." Ves clinically judged.

He pressed a couple of buttons that caused the Ancient Sarcophagus to float through a partition in the wall.

As the Ancient Sarcophagus kept floating further and further away, William gradually subsided from his panic.

"Mr. Larkinson! Please.. no more.. I can't take it anymore!" William blubbered as tears streamed down his face.

Ves smirked. "You're doing fine so far, William, but the best is yet to come! Your treatment begins now!"

"W-Wait? W-What do you mean by that?!"

Ves concentrated his mind and turned his attention inward. He pulled out the mote of spirituality he cut out of Nyxie's spiritual fragment.

Compared to the real Nyxie, the mote looked a little more diminished. Ves had cut out numerous undesirable portions to purify it a bit, but it still shared a very close resemblance to the source.

The mote was just as domineering, tyrannical and arrogant as Nyxie himself. The only difference was that Ves cut out the majority of attributes that screamed alien.

"I hope this will do." He softly whispered. "Let the contamination begin."

Ves controlled the mote by controlling the spiritual barrier that surrounded it.. The mote floated across the observation room and passed through the thick transparent wall as if it didn't exist.

The mote continued to float forward until it silently slipped into William's head.

The Urbesh clansman suddenly jerked and froze as he felt a very peculiar sensation.

Something that felt much like the red coffin that previously terrorized him had returned! What was worse was that it felt a lot closer to him now than before!

"AHHHHHHH!" William clutched his head and fell to his knees.

Ves was worried that William would bang his head against the wall or something, so he activated another command that caused gravitic fields to force William to lie down on the ground and keep him in place.

"Keep still and don't hurt yourself! Don't resist! Embrace the change!"

Even though Nyxie's mote was just floating inside William's head, Ves could see that the mech pilot's spirituality could clearly sense the new presence!

A lot of turbulence took place as William's spirituality reacted with extreme fear, so much so that Ves sensed that the spiritual attributes related to fear started to expand!

"Goddammit! That's not what I want!" Ves cursed.

He quickly activated some commands that caused the testing chamber to inject some sedatives in William's body.

Though the test subject's body calmed down, Ves could quickly observe from his spiritual vision that the sedatives had done little to William's mental distress!

The presence of that tiny but powerful mote inspired a fear that was far more primal and acute than anything that William had ever sensed before!

What annoyed Ves was that the contamination that he was hoping for hadn't taken place.

"Do I need to increase his exposure?" He mused. "I might as well."

Ves reduced the strength of the barrier blocking some of the mote's influence.

"AAAHHHHH! GHERHEHRRHLELK!"

William began to shout gibberish for some reason as soon as Ves allowed Nyxie's mote to exert more influence.

"Interesting." Ves smiled and observed closely.

Though William's fright quickly approached a breaking point, Ves finally observed a tiny change.

A tiny portion of William's spirituality had shifted in attributes!

Ves had to observe very closely to notice this minor change, but once he did, he smiled. "It's happening!"

The contamination started agonizingly slow. Ves had to inject heavier sedatives into William's bloodstream in order to prevent his heart from beating too hard!

Fortunately, William's body enjoyed plenty of augmentations that massively improved his toughness and physical condition.

If William possessed a baseline human body, then his heart would have already exploded from the ordeals that Ves had subjected him to. There was only so much fear a human could handle!

"Are you succeeding, Ves?" Gloriana curiously asked.

"I am!" He grinned and waved his hand at the convulsing body of his test subject. "He is being transformed in front of our eyes! When we finally pull him out of this testing chamber, he'll probably come out as a different man!"

The contamination began to spread once Nyxie's mote established a beachhead in the mech pilot's spirituality.

Since William did not possess that much spiritual energy in the first place, the contamination rapidly began to overtake the attributes that used to belong to him. Every attribute related to fear started to melt and transform into attributes that fell more in line with Nyxie!

However, Ves quickly stopped grinning when he realized a very serious problem.

The contamination also started to affect William's spiritual imprint! The mech pilot started to lose ownership of his own spiritual potential!

The alien was starting to take over!

Chapter 1563 Spiritual Dividends

"Right now, my boyfriend is engaged in a groundbreaking experiment." Gloriana softly whispered as if there was a recorder hovering in front of her. "Both of us are currently pioneering a special treatment for mech pilots who are afflicted with certain disorders that prevent them from unleashing their potential in battle."

Her comm lit up while it recorded a narrow shot of her face. In the background, Ves continued to put his total concentration on William Urbesh, thereby remaining ignorant of what his girlfriend was doing at the moment.

"GHRUERHGGH!" A garbled voice burst out from the speakers. "GhullZizne KWanHansha TOrInOZ ONONMENAIKKA!"

Gloriana stifled her giggle. "Please don't mind the strange noises you hear in the background. Our volunteer ?— who the Mech Trade Association has entrusted to us for his treatment, by the way ?— is currently undergoing a painful but necessary procedure that will definitely fix his

"MR. LARKINSON! I WILL KILL YOU ONCE I GET OUT! YOU REAWNZ KkTANonzER VEONEW MOEneWINQA OPLZNNE!"

"Wow! Our volunteer is already showing improvement! Previously, he was too afraid to make any threats. Just listen at him now. Isn't he better? Our special treatment is working, hihi!"

She manipulated her recorder so that it zoomed in on Ves, detailing his focused expression and his Pride of Dusk ensemble.

"Just look at how handsome he is when he's so serious!" Gloriana swooned. "Ves is the best lover I can ask for, and he's all mine! Together, we're capable of achieving so many new things. We have some ambitious mech designs in the planning and we can't wait to astound you all with our revolutionary new products! What we are doing right now is merely a taste of what is to come!"

Some of the instruments started beeping alarms. However, Ves paid no attention to them at all despite how urgent they sounded.

Seeing that Ves did not respond to the alarms, Gloriana showed no concern either. She trusted in her boyfriend's judgement!

"To all of the mech pilots out there, have you ever wanted to become gods?" She excitingly whispered. "Well, soon we'll be offering everyone a chance! Whether you're a man or a woman, as long as you commission a custom mech from us, we'll do everything possible to design a mech that is literally touched by the gods! With our respective specialties, our mechs are guaranteed to be the most perfect machines that match your qualities, thereby maximizing the odds that you'll transcend your current place in the six phases of existence!"

As Gloriana kept recording an impromptu promotion for her Commbook page, Ves truly couldn't spare any attention to anything else.

He needed to invest his full concentration in manipulating the transformation that was taking place in William's spirituality!

Ves underestimated Nyxie. Even when he only cut off a tiny mote from a greater whole, its versatility greatly surpassed his estimates.

The mote employed tricks that were so profound that Qilanxo looked like an amateur by comparison!

This fellow was trickier than he thought!

Was this the difference between a sentient alien from an advanced civilization and an exobeast who solely relied on her natural abilities?

He even guessed that Nyxie might have been far stronger when he was in the prime of his life. Only until he was killed and locked up in the Ancient Sarcophagus had his lingering spirituality begun to fade.

Ves probably stood no chance at all if he faced Nyxie in his prime!

Fortunately, spending eons locked up inside a crystal coffin probably wore away a lot of the alien's strength. The only problem was that even if Nyxie lost a lot of strength, his refined abilities still gave Ves a lot of headaches!

The spiritual barrier surrounding the mote started cracking and leaking out all kinds of attacks. Nyxie fully committed to contaminating and outright taking over William's spirituality!

Even though Nyxie only took over a portion of his target, the newly-converted element immediately began to spread out into other parts of William's mind, including his core consciousness!

Just like with Ves a while ago, Nyxie only needed a small beachhead to use as a springboard for a greater invasion! As long as he managed to exploit a vulnerability, it was incredibly hard to overcome his dizzying attacks!

In fact, Ves found it puzzling how much more sophisticated Nyxie had become. The imprisoned alien tyrant hadn't shown nearly as much sophistication in his previous attacks!

Ves remembered back when he first probed Nyxie that the alien only utilized the simplest brute-force attacks that his B-stone lockbox perfectly blocked.

Now, Ves had the feeling that using such a crude method to defend against Nyxie wouldn't work anymore. The alien appeared to have revived some of his cunning and his brilliance from the long eons of isolation and decay!

Where did Nyxie obtain all of this strength?!

A sudden realization came to Ves. Didn't he recently sell tens of thousands of Desolate Soldiers and Holy Soldiers?

Both of those mech models utilized the Solemn Guardian as their design spirit.

The Solemn Guardian was his second spiritual product. Ves made it by combining the broken fragments of an expert pilot and Nyxie with his own spiritual energy as the glue and the spark of life!

Even though the wondrous life creation process resulted in an entirely new living spiritual entity, the Solemn Guardian still possessed some lingering ties to its 'parents'.

This meant that both Venerable Plinter and Nyxie certainly received a substantial spiritual supplement!

Ves regarded these transfers as spiritual dividends. In exchange for investing some of their spiritual energy into the formation of a spiritual product, they became eligible to receive a return on investment.

The more mech pilots used the mechs watched over by design spirits they invested in, the more spiritual energy fed back to them! When the numbers reached tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of mech pilots, the dividends probably reached a very substantial quantity!

Through this interaction, his previous design spirits such as the Black Phoenix, the crystal builder leader, Qilanxo and Prophet Ylvaine all grew in strength, becoming just a little bit more powerful!

It was as if Gloriana was right. They were all akin to gods who grew from the power of worship. With mech pilots as their supplicants, the spiritual investors only had to sit back and absorb the energies flowing to them through the man-machine connection!

The only consolation to Ves was that while Nyxie had revived some of his wits after eons of dormancy, he hadn't actually grown much stronger.

Ves guessed that the quality of Nyxie's spirituality was so high that the alien hardly gained a benefit from low-quality sources.

Even Qilanxo was being hampered by this growth, hence her attempts to elevate her chosen to expert pilots and higher.

In other words, Ves did not have much to fear from Nyxie in the short term. No matter how many mech pilots utilized the Soldier product line, most of them were irrelevant due to their paltry, low-quality donations.

The story would be different if an expert pilot began to pilot a Desolate Soldier, but what were the chances of that happening?

A rickety budget mech would never be able to keep up with the performance of an expert pilot! His Desolate Soldiers also didn't incorporate any expensive resonating materials, thereby giving very little room for expert pilots to express their might!

Still, how long would it take for Nyxie to gain enough supplements to regain his full strength? Years? Decades?

Ves didn't know. All he knew so far was that the Ancient Sarcophagus had probably been designed to trap a much more powerful spiritual entity. The complete inability for Nyxie to escape the bonds of his prison already said much.

The issue was that every cage had its limits.

As long as Ves kept farming spiritual fragments from Nyxie, he would continually weaken the spiritual entity. However, once Ves utilized the spiritual fragments in the creation of spiritual products, the dividends flowing back to Nyxie would increase.

This was the frightening part about investments. As long as they were successful, they returned far more than the investor initially paid.

Ves became more and more grave as he thought of the implications.

He predicted that at some point, Nyxie would earn so many dividends that his growth could no longer be contained!

By then, not only would Nyxie find a way to break out of the Ancient Sarcophagus, but also take revenge on Ves for mutilating him and exploiting him for his spiritual fragments!

He should have figured out this danger before!

"At least it's not too late."

So far, Ves had only used a single spiritual fragment from Nyxie in his mech designs. He could still come up with various means to limit Nyxie's growth.

His best hope was to find a way to manipulate the Solemn Guardian into denying Nyxie his rightful share. By embezzling the dividends he was supposed to receive, Nyxie would not be able to profit from his investments!

"I'll have to look into this later." Ves shook his head.

Right now, Ves was rapidly learning how to deal with Nyxie's tricks. No matter how sophisticated the alien tried to take advantage of the situation, the mote only possessed a miniscule fraction of his total strength.

While it was more than enough to overpower William's spiritual potential, Ves was different.

By employing his full strength, Ves simply resorted to brute force methods to cut off any attempts by Nyxie to take over William's mind and body!

Nyxie utilized thousands of finely-controlled strands of silk to envelop William's mind and consciousness.

Ves formed a giant cleaver with his spiritual energy and hacked at the strands with abandon!

In fact, Ves could have ended the attacks immediately if he destroyed Nyxie's mote of spirituality.

However, he didn't want to end this tug-of-war immediately.

Even through all of the new developments, he always kept his ultimate goal in mind.

William Urbesh needed to become a different man. One that was capable of advancing to expert candidate.

A very serious question came to Ves. Should he allow Nyxie to take over William's mind?

No matter how dangerous and hostile the alien acted, Ves could not deny that it was an exceptional spiritual entity.

If such a strong entity turned William into a puppet, as long as Ves taught it how to act like a human, the 'William' that emerged would likely become one of the most promising mech pilots in the star sector!

Ves was very confident that this version 'William' would easily be able to advance to expert pilot, especially if he fully retained the original William's memories and skills!

In this way, Ves stood a very high chance of completing the mission issued by the Rim Guardians.

"What am I thinking? This is stupid!"

Perhaps he would gain enormously in the short term, but Ves didn't have to think a lot to figure out that 'William' might eventually grow into a monster! Once 'William' advanced to ace pilot or something, he could single-handedly return to Ves and destroy everything he built in order to retrieve the Ancient Sarcophagus and free its prisoner!

There was no way that Ves would allow Nyxie to grow out of control in this fashion!

"What should I do instead?"

When he began to get a handle on Nyxie's varied attack methods, he rapidly contained the alien's attempts to take over William's mind and body.

However, Nyxie's imprint had still taken over a large chunk of William's spiritual potential, replacing the mech pilot's imprint with an alien spiritual imprint.

Ves couldn't allow even a shred of alien imprint to remain in William's mind!

"It seems I'll have to get rid of it all!"

Before he started to manipulate the imprints, Ves first pulled back Nyxie's spiritual mote from William's head. It had already served its purpose and its continued presence was not doing William any favors.

Once Ves returned the mote in his own mind, he began to focus on his test subject's spiritual potential and tried to manipulate it with utmost care.

He had never messed with someone's spirituality in this fashion before. That excited him to no end!

Chapter 1564 Ves the Spiritual Surgeon

William fell silent as the chamber kept pressing him down to the floor. The trapped mech pilot no longer shouted threats and obscenities, whether in standard or alien language.

It was almost disturbing to see him so still. He might actually be dead if not for the instruments transmitting William's active life signals!

Ves stood silent in the observation chamber as his eyes continued to sear at William's prone body. He wasn't watching his test subject with his normal vision right now. He wasn't even employing his spiritual vision.

In order to examine William's spirituality to the finest degree, he directly employed his spiritual senses.

Right now, over sixty percent of William's spirituality possessed a different imprint. Nyxie had wiped away the original imprints and replaced them with his own, all through relying on indirect contamination!

This was a highly advanced application that Ves was pretty sure he could never replicate.

Nonetheless, he took a lot of inspiration from all of the means that Nyxie displayed today. As long as Ves digested them, he might be able to improve his ability to manipulate other people's spiritualities in the future.

For now, Ves needed to tackle the immediate problem. What was he supposed to do?

He knew he had to remove Nyxie's imprint. The problem with doing it straight away was that Ves wasn't sure what would happen next.

Would William be able to reclaim what he lost by expanding his imprint into the territory that Ves liberated from Nyxie's clutches?

"Well, let's try."

Ves summoned up a spiritual projection and brought it forward to William's mind. He began to employ it as a surgery tool, using it to gently wipe away the imprint left by Nyxie.

"It's more difficult than I thought."

Nyxie's imprint was not that easy to remove! It possessed its own intrinsic strength and will and actively resisted any casual attempts to weaken its presence!

Ves felt as if he was trying to rub away a stain on his shirt!

Seeing as his strength was insufficient, Ves reinforced his spiritual projection by pumping it with more spiritual energy. He began to employ a bit more power in his actions.

Though he risked the possibility of harming or outright breaking William's spiritual potential, he finally achieved some results!

"It's working!"

Nyxie in his prime would have easily been able to endure against anything Ves could throw at him, but only a very minute portion of the alien's total strength had transferred over to William.

As high-quality as it appears to be, its quantity was wholly insufficient.

The only problem was that William's spirituality showed signs of heavy strain. If Ves applied too much force, then the consequences would be imaginable.

Ves wasn't sure what would happen if William's spirituality shattered into pieces. Death or becoming comatose were very real possibilities.

Personally, Ves believed the most likely outcome was that William would just suffer some mental damage while becoming spiritually crippled.

Ves didn't believe that anyone could regain their spiritual potential once they lost it. The only way to salvage the situation was for Ves to find out a way to allow a spiritually-insensitive norm to gain spiritual potential.

This was incredibly hard. While Ves hadn't performed much research in this area, with his current understanding of spirituality, he believed it wasn't something he could do at this stage!

It was much easier to work with someone who already possessed spiritual potential. That was why Ves paid so much attention to hiring people like Nitaa, the Ingvars and so on.

While it wasn't guaranteed that they would be able to make use of their potential, at least the possibility existed.

Ves acted carefully in removing the alien imprint. It became easier when he continued to make more progress. As Nyxie's grip on William's spirituality weakened, his imprint's resistance lessened.

Everything depended on power!

After a tense few minutes, Ves finally managed to remove every trace of Nyxie inside William's spirituality.

Now, a part of William had become ownerless, for a lack of better word. The spiritual attributes introduced by Nyxie suddenly became detached from their source.

Normally, someone with different spiritual attributes wouldn't be able to merge with them. Otherwise, Ves would have already tried to accelerate the growth of his own Spirituality Attribute by plundering the spiritual energy of other entities.

The attributes had to match. That was the rule he discovered.

In fact, Ves believed it wasn't that simple and that more rules were at work that prevented someone from absorbing spiritual energy willy-nilly.

However, this was a special case. The spiritual attributes and imprint had changed very recently. Since spiritual energy was basically related to life, Ves bet that it retained a connection to its old state.

Of course, the most important reason why this was different was that the ownerless portion was still a part of William's spirituality!

The parts that Nyxie temporarily took over hadn't separated from William. Instead, both of their spiritualities remained a single whole as they warred over control.

Ves believed that this was the final step to accomplishing his goal.

If this method succeeded, then he would have another technique under his belt. He called it spiritual attribute contamination.

"Well, let's see if it works."

William's spirituality had sustained severe damage. William himself was half-comatose from all of the trauma he went through.

In addition, as a pathetic coward, William was incapable of launching any attacks. The most he could do was to hunker down and delay the inevitable.

Getting this fellow's spirituality to attack and reclaim the ownerless portion did not succeed. The parts that Nyxie took over may have converted some of William's cowardly attributes into different ones, but there was plenty of cowardice left.

Ves did not expect to be able to remove every trace of William's fears. It was already good enough to take a large bite of it so that it was much less dominant in the mech pilot's spirituality.

Fear was something that every human possessed. Fear was so intrinsic to William that Ves was afraid that William's spirituality might not even be able to connect anymore with the mind it came from. A certain degree of fit still needed to be present.

"The results so far are already sufficient."

What Ves actually aimed for was transforming a part of William's spiritual attributes. Now, over sixty percent of them had been changed into a mixture that conformed to the partially-purified spiritual mote.

That meant that about half of William's spirituality now consisted of attributes related to tyranny, dominance, arrogance, confidence and other such descriptors.

As long as they matched or exceeded the strength of William's cowardice, then a state of balance could be achieved.

William would no longer be a coward. However, he also wouldn't become a tyrannical monster. He'd be... someone different. Someone in between.

The only complication was that a few alien attributes had also slipped in. This might introduce some anomalies, but not too much as their presence was rather small.

Hopefully, William wouldn't be spurting alien words from his mouth anytime soon. Such an incident might put Ves in an awkward spot.

Ves continued to work on his test subject's spirituality. After applying various means, he finally forced William's imprint to expand on the recently-vacated portions.

Since they originally belonged to William and was still a part of his spirituality, his imprint expanded with only minor issues.

Obviously, William was reluctant to inherit completely new spiritual attributes. Ves continually had to force the process along.

At the end of it, Ves sighed in relief. He inspected William's mind and spirituality for a few more minutes and only observed some gradual changes. None of them suggested that Nyxie's influence was coming back from the dead.

Instead, William's cowardice maintained a feeble balance against his newly-acquired traits. How much the state of his spirituality reflected the state of his mind and emotions remained to be seen.

Ves knew that they were connected, but so far he had mostly witnessed someone's emotions shaping someone's spirituality. He had never seen the reverse taking place until today when Nyxie tried to hijack William's mind by capturing his spirituality.

"I don't even know how that can even be done."

Even though he had a front-row seat of Nyxie's insidious methods, Ves understood very little of it. Nyxie's application of spiritual energy was so advanced that it seemed to be a highly-developed specialty or discipline.

The entity trapped within the Ancient Sarcophagus became more and more formidable to Ves.

Once Ves reflected enough on what he learned, he shoved the rest to the back of his mind and directed his attention on the immediate situation.

"It's done." He said with a relieved voice.

"Really?" Gloriana quickly shut off her comm with a puzzled smile. "You.. didn't do anything. You just stood there while William started screaming and convulsing. What in the galaxy did you do to the poor boy?"

Ves turned to his girlfriend. "I thought I told you that I would be applying my design philosophy to treat William's affliction. Haven't you been paying attention?"

"I did." Gloriana innocently blinked. "I haven't seen anything."

"You're not supposed to be able to see anything with your eyes. Didn't you feel anything?"

Gloriana shook her head.

"Huh. Well, whatever." Ves shrugged. "Let's bring William to an infirmary and inspect him in person."

While he believed that Gloriana was able to sense spirituality, her spiritual perception probably wasn't sensitive enough to feel what went on in William's mind.

Nyxie's spiritual mote wasn't very strong to begin with. The scale of everything that happened today was very limited because William simply couldn't cope with anything stronger.

Ves, Gloriana and their cats exited the observation room.

Moments later, a hovering stretcher brought out an unconscious William from the chamber. A bodyguard took charge of the stretcher and guided it towards an infirmary at the manufacturing floor.

Considering how many heavy parts and machinery were at that floor, workplace accidents occasionally took place. Mech technicians needed to be treated immediately, hence the floor held a very comprehensive infirmary.

As they all moved to the infirmary, Ves let the doctors inspect William for a while before placing him in an isolated room.

The doctors asked plenty of questions about William's strange state and all of the sedatives that Ves had pumped into his bloodstream, but that was all. Since Ves was the boss, he outright refused to answer the questions.

"All you need to do is make sure that William recovers. Understand?"

Afterwards, Ves and Gloriana left. They moved back to the lab and workshop floor in order to process and analyze the sensor readings.

"These readings are useless." Gloriana scowled and waved at the graphs and figures projected in front of her. "Pure divinity can't be captured by sensors!"

"Humanity has only managed to find a way to detect and measure resonance." Ves remarked. "And that is only a single facet of what is actually taking place. It's a shame you can't see what I can see. You're missing out on a lot."

"Can you teach me?" Gloriana asked with a hopeful smile.

"I'm not sure. I always thought it was something I was born with. It could also be a side effect of my design philosophy."

The more they cooperated with each other, the more they became aware of each other's strengths. Gloriana quickly figured out what she needed in order to gain a deeper understanding of his abilities.

Yet just as how Ves wasn't able to make much headway with Gloriana's methods, Gloriana wasn't able to emulate him either. They were simply too different.

Gloriana accepted his answer and didn't push any further.

Both of them were mech designers. Both of them understood each other in a way that a non-mech designer never could.

They spent a few hours studying the data they gathered before transferring it all in a secure data chip. Ves personally stored it in the vault in order to keep it safe.

"Done!"

Chapter 1565 Breach of Trust

After Ves observed William's physical, mental and spiritual state the next day, he judged that the mech pilot might be out for a short while.

After the doctors flushed out the chemicals from William's body, there shouldn't be anything wrong with his physical state.

The main problems lay in his mental and spiritual state. Both experienced a fair amount of turmoil. Though Ves found it difficult to describe what was going on, he had the impression that a very deep transformation was taking place.

"Good." Ves smiled.

This was exactly what he wanted to see. Ves welcomed any change regardless of the outcome because anything was better than what William was like before.

Once Ves patted William's unconscious head and moved up to his office, Gavin immediately brought something disconcerting to his attention.

"Did you know what your girlfriend just did?"

"What?"

"It's better if I show you."

Gavin activated his comm and visited a Commbook page. He played a recording that had just been put up yesterday.

Ves immediately recognized the footage and turned grave.

"Right now, my boyfriend is engaged in a groundbreaking experiment..."

"GHR—BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP."

"Wow! Our volunteer is already showing improvement!..."

"BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP."

"Just look at how handsome he is when he's so serious!..."

The recording lasted for a couple more minutes before it ended.

Ves waved his hand, silently ordering Gavin to shut off the projection.

"Boss?"

"Let me think." Ves replied and went still.

Anger coursed through his mind. However, this was not the time to act impulsively! If he acted impulsively, he might make a decision that strained his relationship with Gloriana without achieving anything in return.

In a situation like this, Ves needed to think with his mind instead of his heart.

He patiently waited for an entire minute for his anger to mellow out a bit. Now that he calmed down somewhat, Ves began to consider seriously what Gavin had just displayed.

Apparently, Gloriana recorded a very sensitive experiment that Ves was engaged in yesterday. He never intended to bring her along, but she requested to observe his treatment.

Since Ves trusted Gloriana quite a bit, he gave in to her request and let her into the observation room while he performed his experiment.

Instead of standing still and watching William turn into a lunatic, she recorded a portion of what was happening and even slipped in some self-promotion along the way!

Ves did not mind the self-promotion, but he deeply objected to publicizing something which wasn't meant to be published!

Gloriana pretty much aired some of his dirty laundry in public!

The one saving grace about what she had done was that she censored William's ravings. The footage came across as much less severe, since Ves said very little and mostly stood still like a rock.

As a result, the recording largely centered around Gloriana's words. Though she said plenty of discomfiting stuff, she hadn't actually said anything too alarming. Only a follower of hexism would take her words seriously. Everyone else would probably dismiss her claims as the ravings of a religious nut.

Did that make the situation better? Somewhat. At the very least, Gloriana shouldn't have said anything that the MTA already knew.

That still didn't make this right. Ves felt incredibly violated by her actions. What possessed her to cross such a line?

Perhaps it was best to ask her himself. Now that he thought over the situation, his anger had fully mellowed out into a smouldering simmer.

While he was still angry, he believed he regained enough rationality that he wouldn't be doing anything stupid anytime soon.

Ves breathed deeply and sat down behind his desk. He placed his fingers together and looked at Gavin.

"Please summon Gloriana to my office. Tell her that she better be here in ten minutes."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

Once Gavin relayed the message, he observed his boss in order to figure out what might happen.

"Are you okay, Ves?"

"I think so. I'm still pissed. She posted something that she shouldn't have posted."

"I think it's okay, Ves." Gavin reassured him. "The footage didn't show off anything interesting aside from you standing in front of an observation chamber. I didn't even get to catch a glimpse of the 'volunteer' that you were busy with. Was it William, by the way?"

Ves nodded.

"I thought so. The scream I just heard at the start sounds like his voice before the beeping sounds blocked out the rest."

From the way Gavin reacted to the footage, Ves understood that the true nature of his experiment hadn't been revealed.

Gloriana might make some strange decisions every once in a while, but she wasn't stupid. Ves never underestimated her smarts.

It took some time for Gloriana to arrive. Once she entered, she quickly read the atmosphere.

"Is there something wrong, Ves?"

Ves waved in front of his desk. "Please take a seat. I want everyone out, including your bodyguards."

By now, the Glory Battalion was quite familiar with Ves, so they did not put up much of an objection.

Of course, part of the reason why they did so was that Clixie remained at Gloriana's side. While Ves had never seen a Rubarthan Sentinel Cat in action, he knew that they served as powerful protectors.

As for Lucky, Ves had no idea where his cat went off too. The little bastard frequently went on unannounced excursions.

Oh well. Ves would just have to conduct his meeting without his pet distracting Clixie.

"Gloriana." He began. "Can you please explain what you just uploaded on your Commbook page?"

"Hmph?" She tilted her head while twirling a lock of her dark hair. "Oh that? You looked so handsome back then. The way you became so intense and focused on your experiment was so awesome that I simply had to record it for posterity!"

BANG!

"Be serious with me!" Ves shouted while leaning forward with his fist pressed against his desk. "If you wanted to record something, that's one thing, but publishing it onto your Commbook where the entire galaxy is another thing!"

"I didn't publish anything sensitive!" Gloriana pouted at him and crossed her arms. "I made sure to censor William's words and fade out the readings in the background."

"Who knows whether you were thorough enough! Do you still have the full footage stashed somewhere? Delete it as quickly as possible! In fact, take the entire data chip or storage unit and melt it down!"

"What?!"

Ves glared at her. "Do you know how much I care about secrets? A lot! I trusted you with some of my secrets. That does not give you a license to air them on Commbook!"

"But I didn't, Ves! My recording was mostly about you and me, not about your experiment!"

BANG!

This time, Ves used both of his fists to slam against his desk!

"That doesn't excuse your actions! Even if you think you've been thorough in cleaning up the footage, what if you miss something?"

Gloriana grinned. "I never make mistakes."

"EVERYONE MAKES MISTAKES! You're still human! You aren't perfect! If you wanted to publish a moment, then why not make one while we are relaxing at the Cloud Estate or something?"

"That's boring." The woman replied flatly. "I already uploaded plenty of moments like that on my Commbook. My friends and cousins are all bored of seeing us cuddling up together. I wanted to publish something fresher!"

This woman!

Ves wanted to tear his hair out!

He forcibly paused in order to calm himself down.

"What you want isn't necessarily what I want." He spoke with forced calmness. "Did you ever consider my opinion when you recorded me yesterday?"

"I did. I thought you'd approve. I didn't upload anything sensitive, at least I think so. How could I know you'd make such a big fuss out of this? I never make a mistake, Ves!"

"You! Urgh! If this recording is just meant to show something fresh, then what about all of the self-promotion? That doesn't sound like you're appealing to your friends!"

"I'm not lying, Ves! Do you know who my friends are? They're all part of powerful dynasties! Many of them are either mech pilots or are related to mech pilots! Do you remember my mother's challenge? I was just scouting around for potential customers!"

"What does it matter?!"

"It matters a lot, Ves! We can't design a custom mech for a low-tier mech pilot from my state! If we really want to demonstrate our value, then we need to be capable of designing high-performing custom mechs! Those are really expensive machines, you know? Finding a skilled mech pilot that is willing to pay a lot of hex credits for a high-performing machine isn't as easy as you think! We're just Journeymen in a state where many Seniors are more than willing to design custom mechs for distinguished clients!"

Ves knew that nothing could be gained from further arguing. He understood his girlfriend well enough that she believed in her reasoning. At most, she only regretted that Ves did not agree with her on this point.

The two of them weren't normal people. Even if they weren't as stubborn and intractable as expert pilots, as Journeymen they weren't used to conceding.

As the uncomfortable silence stretched on, Gloriana began to show a bit more remorse.

"Ves.. please don't stay angry. I'm sorry, okay? I'll delete the recording if you want."

"Please do so right away." Ves sighed.

She quickly activated her comm and wiped away the recording.

"It's done."

"How many people watched the recording?"

"According to Commbook... 135,343 people."

"What?! How many friends do you have?!"

"My Commbook is public! A lot of strangers are following my Commbook page. I think most of them are bots and AIs that are merely logging and aggregating what people are doing on Commbook!"

"That means that all of those bots and AIs have probably downloaded the recordings and stored it into their databanks." Ves darkly concluded.

Even if Gloriana deleted the recording, more than a hundred thousand copies still existed! It was impossible for Ves to track them all down and erase them from existence!

As Ves became more and more angry, Gloriana seemed to sense that he was upset.

"Ves.. I'm really sorry. I won't do something like this again, okay?"

Tears began to well in her eyes, making her appear extraordinarily vulnerable. She looked so lost and forlorn that Ves simply couldn't maintain his anger.

It was as if her tears doused his fire.

However, even if Ves couldn't remain angry at her, that didn't mean that he forgave her. Ves needed more time to process what had happened.

"Please leave me alone, Gloriana." Ves waved her away. "I don't want to deal with you right now."

"Ves!"

"Leave." He said more firmly. "I can't guarantee I'll remain polite if you stay. It is taking me a lot to hold back my words."

Although his anger had subsided, his resentment hadn't faded at all. His inner Devil Tongue eagerly wanted to lash out at Gloriana, but Ves forcefully suppressed this impulse.

He could not subject Gloriana to this treatment. She was not his enemy. She was just a crazy woman who did something crazy.

Ves had let down his guard, he realized. He knew that Gloriana didn't think and act normally, but in the month they had been together, she rarely exhibited any oddities.

In fact, Ves had been charmed by how well she accommodated him. If not for her Hexer beliefs, then she was little different from a Brighter girlfriend!

Unfortunately, how could there be anything perfect in the galaxy? Gloriana wasn't perfect, and so wasn't Ves.

Though Gloriana looked as if she wanted to say something, she held herself back. She stood up, wiped away her tears and brought Clixie out of the office.

Once the doors closed, Ves remained alone.

"Where is Lucky?" He muttered. "I could really use some company right now."

Chapter 1566 Deeper Motive

"Gloriana may be capricious, but I don't think she's dumb." Ves stated to Gavin the next day.

Ves believed that Gloriana hadn't been entirely forthcoming in their earlier conversation. As a habitual liar himself, he recognized when someone was acting in a self-serving manner.

His girlfriend possessed another motive. Ves was sure of it. The feelings he sensed from her did not entirely match her facade.

For his part, Gavin partially agreed. "Prominent Hexers such as Gloriana are certainly aware of what they should or should not publicize. The Wodin Dynasty has an image to maintain. In their circles, I imagine that it's a big taboo to air dirty laundry on the galactic net."

"Then why did she went through with this idiotic act?"

"I think.. Gloriana doesn't see it as an unwise act." Gavin slowly guessed. "I know what you're like. You're very touchy about your secrets. Your girlfriend isn't like that. When I first watched her recording, I didn't see anything remarkable. I only brought it to your attention because the setting is rather odd."

Ves recalled what he saw. The footage only depicted a narrow shot of him standing still. His spiritual manipulation couldn't be sensed by normal people, let alone electronic recorders. William's body was fully out of sight and Gloriana censored almost all of William's screams.

Now that a day had passed since he confronted Gloriana with the footage, Ves realized that the damage wasn't as big as he imagined. At the very least, someone wouldn't be able to detect anything incriminating from the footage alone.

It was just.. Ves still found it perplexing that Gloriana saw no problem in uploading the recording. Since she sanitized the footage, she must have known that it was a sensitive moment.

"Gloriana isn't stupid." He repeated with a pensive expression. "What does she have to gain from this act?"

Was it really to solicit customers from her circle? Ves doubted it. She could have approached her friends and acquaintances in a more discreet manner.

Both of them entertained some suggestions, but neither of them came up with a compelling answer.

Ves turned to his bodyguard. "Nitaa. You're a woman, right? You've listened in on everything. Do you understand what Gloriana is after?"

The tall woman leaning against the far wall shrugged. "While I'm capable of discerning the intentions of many people, Miss Gloriana is beyond my capabilities. All I can say is

that Gloriana likely holds no malice towards you. In her eyes, she saw no harm in her own actions."

Though Ves found it difficult to accept that viewpoint, his girlfriend's perspective was very different from his own.

Not only did she carry less secrets, her trust in institutions was still intact! As a result, she lacked the paranoid and suspicious mindset that Ves had developed over the past few years.

With threats such as the MTA, CFA and the Five Scrolls Compact looming over his head, Ves had become extraordinarily sensitive to secrecy!

Maybe it was a bit too unreasonable for him to expect the same degree of caution from Gloriana.

Having grown up in a largely-protected environment, she had no reason to develop the same level of paranoia as him. With no devastating secrets to hide and with the Wodin Dynasty as her backer, why would she be as touchy as him? Maybe it was him who overreacted!

"I think you're right, Nitaa." Ves nodded. "However, I still have an uncomfortable feeling about this. There must be something more behind her actions."

"I can't suggest anything further, but I think someone else may be able to shed a light on this matter." Nitaa said.

"Who?"

"Your spy associates."

"No." Ves immediately replied.

Approaching Leland was not a good idea. Flashlight followed its own agenda, and they may or may not have an interest in manipulating his relationship with Gloriana.

As for Calabast, she was not impartial either. As a Hexer and a woman with her own agenda, she would never let go of this opportunity to further her own interests!

Nitaa thought for a moment. "Then.. perhaps you might want to invite Casella Ingvar to your office. As a former noble, she's capable of thinking on the same level as Gloriana."

Both Ves and Gavin looked intrigued.

"Casella is a former scion from the Kingdom of the Three Flowers, which is just a third-rate state." Ves recalled. "I doubt she is fully able to understand Gloriana's context."

Gavin disagreed. "She's a noble, therefore she's highly trained in social interactions. Some things are common to all nobles. While nobility technically doesn't exist in the Hegemony, her status there is pretty much identical. I think it doesn't hurt to hear what Casella has to say."

After a bit of contemplation, Ves agreed with Gavin's suggestion. He called Melkor and told him to send Casella to his office.

Fifteen minutes later, Casella Ingvar stepped into the room. Her golden Avatar service uniform enhanced her dignity to a degree that made a very powerful impression.

She strode forward in a stiff gait and bowed towards Ves. "You called, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Yes." Ves blinked before shaking off his fascination for Casella. He activated his desk terminal and ran the recording that Gavin had saved. "Please watch this while I describe my situation."

He explained what happened with Gloriana while Casella watched the recording multiple times. Her frown increased as she heard his speculations.

"I think your suspicions aren't unfounded sir." She eventually spoke. "Although I haven't interacted with Miss Gloriana, a woman of her station would not make such an elementary mistake. Can you show me her Commbook page?"

"Certainly."

Once Casella started to browse Gloriana's Commbook page, she began to hum and nod.

Ves, Gavin and Nitaa watched wordlessly as Casella continued to observe Gloriana's social media interactions.

After ten minutes of browsing through numerous posts that mostly consisted of an image of Ves and Gloriana together, Casella finished forming her judgement.

"I think I understand what Miss Gloriana is aiming for." The newly-recruited Avatar said with a firm expression. "This is just my personal opinion, so please don't assume that I'm a hundred percent sure."

"I'll keep that in mind. Go on, please."

"From what I think, Miss Gloriana has a very simple agenda. She wants to make the two of you inseparable."

"I already figured that out." Ves replied dryly. "I don't mean this as a boast, but she's always been pretty obsessed with me since we first met."

Casella scrolled through Gloriana's commbook page. "Look at how much activity there is. Every day, she posts at least five different recordings and images of you and her together. Although it looks excessive, she's pursuing a very deliberate strategy. She wants her friends and family to develop a deep association of the two of you as a pair."

"You mean.. she's attempting to indoctrinate her circle into accepting our relationship?"

"That's right, sir. Her goal is to make fellow Hexers think that she is always alongside you, and that you are the only man who deserves to be by her side."

"Why?"

"Because it's difficult to build up acceptance for your pairing." Casella sounded more sure of her judgement. "High society is very meticulous about relationships. The problem with your current relationship is that there is a very wide disparity between you and your girlfriend. You're a third-rater from a quant military family. She's a Hexer from a notable Hexer dynasty. The vast gulf between you can't be bridged within a day."

"We developed a plan to bridge this gap." Ves replied. "We intended to develop a mech that is so good in their eyes that any other suitor in the Hegemony pales in comparison."

"That's a good plan, sir, but that is only one measure. Even if you succeed, not everyone will be comfortable with your relationship. Gloriana likely believes that more support is needed to get her circle to accept your right to stay by her side."

Somehow, the explanation fit. It matched his impression of Gloriana. It explained her frequent occupation with Commbook. An ambitious, hardworking mech designer like Gloriana would never waste too much time on idle activities.

"I think you're right, Casella." Gavin looked impressed. "I'm not a noble, but it sounds like something one of their kind would do. I bet that a lot of Hexers, including her own friends and family, look down on us third-raters. What would they think if a dirty space peasant suddenly rose up and smacked them in the faces by outshining their local mech designers?"

Ves tried to imagine the scenario. His face grew more and more grim. In all of his haste to improve himself, he never considered the reactions of other Hexers aside from Gloriana's mother and family.

"So her real goal is to build social acceptance for our pairing." Ves concluded. "If she just told me that, I would have played along. Why didn't she tell me that?"

"Maybe it's something she doesn't want to burden you with." Casella speculated. "She considers it her responsibility. You won't be able to help."

Ves grimaced. Of course a Hexer would think so. A 'boy' like him had little say in Hexer society.

Though Gloriana hadn't behaved like a stereotypical Hexer, that was mostly because she purposefully controlled her behavior. Having spent a lot of time with her, Ves was pretty certain that her ordinary conduct was not as friendly and accommodating as she appeared.

Instances like this revealed the depth that Gloriana wanted to hide from him. A Hexer like her was used to taking charge. That was what Ves had already glimpsed from studying her private correspondence.

"Even if what you say is true, I still find it puzzling that Gloriana thinks that there's nothing wrong with uploading her latest recording."

"It's exactly because it's a sensitive moment that Gloriana wants to share this moment." Casella easily replied. "It shows that the two of you are close at work. All the other Commbok postings mainly show the two of you together in your leisure time. That doesn't tell others whether you are getting along with her during work. Her latest recording strongly suggests that the two of you readily share your most important research with each other."

"I see."

The discussion lasted for a while before Ves finally dismissed Casella.

"Thank you for your insights. You've been very helpful. Keep up the good work and I'm sure you'll go far in the Avatars. I might summon you again from time to time to hear your thoughts."

"It's my honor to serve you, sir."

Casella bowed before turning around and leaving the office.

"What an ambitious woman." Gavin muttered.

"Why would you say so, Benny?"

"She was obviously trying to increase your opinion of her." Gavin grinned. "Not in a romantic way, I think. Casella knows you're off-limits. Instead, I think she worked hard to distinguish herself so that you would shower her with more attention. Once Melkor notices that you've become friends with her, he'll follow suit."

"Ah. Well, I don't blame her for taking advantage of the situation."

He had always considered the Ingvar siblings to be relatively indecisive about working for Ves until recently. Once they realized how much he achieved and how far he could go, they became a lot more committed.

"Well, it's fine." Ves dismissed the issue. "Ambition is not prohibited in my organization as long as it's fruitful."

Now that Casella shed a light on Gloriana's motives, Ves no longer felt as if he was in the dark.

"You should speak to your girlfriend, Ves, and soon. The longer this awkward situation persists, the more our suspense is killing us. We really don't want to see what happens if Gloriana explodes."

"I guess you're right."

Even Ves feared the worst if Gloriana was left to stew on her own.

"Where is Gloriana?" He asked.

Gavin briefly checked his data pad. "According to the Sentinels, she's currently back at the Cloud Estate."

"What is she doing?"

"She's socializing with your relatives."

Ah.

Chapter 1567 Social Acceptance

When Ves arrived at the Cloud Estate, Gloriana was calmly chatting with a group of aunts. They chuckled and giggled as they talked without abandon.

Now that Casella had clued him in, Ves realized what Gloriana was doing. She wanted to earn the approval of the Larkinsons.

She didn't have to, of course. The Larkinson Family never really meddled with relationships because they didn't matter. Even if the Larkinsons disapproved, the most they could do was kick the offending Larkinson out of the official family ranks.

Even if the Larkinson Family did not possess that much power, Ves still preferred it if Gloriana was able to live in harmony with his relatives.

From a practical point of view, the Larkinsons made up a key part of his hierarchy. Several of their retainers still occupied the top management positions in the LMC.

Melkor and many other Larkinson mech pilots formed a solid and dependable core within the Avatars of Myth and the Living Sentinels.

If Gloriana had a falling out with the Larkinsons, then Ves would be put in a very difficult position. He wasn't sure whether he would side with the Larkinsons or Gloriana if he was compelled to make a choice.

"It's best if I'm never confronted with this dilemma."

Gloriana must have understood how difficult it was for Ves to choose between her and his family, because she had been socializing a lot with the Larkinsons at the Cloud Estate.

He stepped forward until his girlfriend noticed his presence.

"Let's talk." Ves jerked his head towards his mansion.

He turned around without seeing her reaction. He was sure she would follow.

Once they entered his mansion and sat down on some couches in an opulent living room.

Then, they both faced each other in silence.

Ves studied Gloriana's expression carefully. Unlike what he imagined, she did not show any guilt or apprehension. The tears she shed yesterday were nowhere to be seen.

When Ves attempted to study her emotions through the spiritual fragment stuck in his mind, he could barely make sense of her head. There were so many emotions roiling in her head that a poor man like Ves instantly became lost.

"Women. Why is your kind so complicated?" He muttered under his breath.

"What's that, Ves?"

"Ah, nothing."

The awkward silence stretched for a while. Eventually, Gloriana couldn't take it any longer. She sighed, stood up from her seat and moved over to sit besides him on the couch.

"Ves.." She stretched out her hand and placed it on his chest. "I already told you I'm sorry. I regret making you so upset. I know better now. I'll make sure to get your approval before I post anything on the galactic net. Is that okay?"

Her appeal made it very difficult for Ves to keep up his distance.

"Earlier today, I asked around. Someone suggested to me that you were working to gain social acceptance of our relationship to the people in your state. Is that true?"

Gloriana looked surprised.

"So it's true?"

"Yes."

"You don't have to keep things from me. If we're in this together, then you should be more forthcoming with me. What are you worried about?"

"You're not a Hexer, so you don't know how we think." She reluctantly said. "Do you know how boys like you are treated in our state?"

"Like kids?"

She shook her head. "Not exactly. More like.. prize pets or trophies. Your pedigree is of utmost importance in our society. Who you are and what your personality is matters little to the Hexers who make up our ruling class."

What he just heard really did not sit well with him. "I'm not a pet like Lucky for you to parade around."

"I know, Ves. I don't want to treat you like that either. I love you, Ves. I really do. Different Hexers have different ideas on how boys should be treated. For my part, I never wanted a useless ornament. I want a partner who can be my equal and can help me go further in mech design. In my eyes, you are far better than any of the boys I've met back home."

"I've heard that several times. What makes me different from the 'boys' you're used to? Describe them to me, please."

Gloriana sneered. "They're too useless. Many female Hexers think that's a good thing. To them, boys ought to be subservient and devoid of initiative, which is completely unlike you. Collaborating with male Hexer mech designers is a waste of my time. They never make any proactive suggestions and always ask for my approval before implementing something to a mech design."

"That sounds really awful." Ves remarked. "Why would any female Hexer even agree to such a thing?"

"To be honest, many female Hexer mech designers simply use the boys under their control as their subordinates. Even if they're married, the boys are simply relegated to an assisting role in any collaborative projects. As a result, hardly any synergy can be

achieved. True synergy only arises if at least two mech designers work from each other's strengths."

That made a lot of sense to Ves. He could see why Gloriana disliked such a working relationship even if it was the norm in the Hegemony.

"If a relationship between a male and female Hexer mech designer is so unproductive, why hasn't the mech industry in your state gone to ruin?"

"Hehe. Real collaborations take place between women. Think of your friend Calabast."

"Ah."

"The women don't have to be intimate to each other to develop a long-term partnership. A lot of recurring collaborations take place among female mech designers. That said, lesbian relationships are very common in our state. Many women even believe that the Hegemony should outlaw male-female relationships entirely because it's obsolete."

"What will happen to the men if that happens?"

"You don't have to worry about that. Only a couple of extreme factions advocate for this policy. I just mentioned it to give you a sample of what certain Hexers think of boys. Any boys they bring along are merely treated as assistants and accessories. If they have any useful specialties, then they're solely added to apply them to a mech design."

"So how does that relate to you, me and your Commbook posts?"

"I think you can guess it now, Ves. I've been trying hard to get my friends to see you as something more than a boy. My mother, my relatives and my friends are all set in their ways, so it will take a long time to make them see you as something more."

"Do all Hexers dismiss men as boys?"

"Some do. Almost every boy from our state is like this. We can be a bit insular, but there are enough Hexers who recognize that foreign men aren't necessarily weaker than them. Only Hexers who live in their own bubble believe that they can impose their standards on everyone else."

"How do they even interact with the men serving in the MTA and CFA?"

She shrugged. "Some Hexers still consider them boys. They just have access to too much power than they can safely wield. They'll inevitably let their juvenile emotions get the better of them and ruin the galaxy somehow. Once that happens, it's time for women to rise up and clean up the messes the boys have made."

That sounded like a horrendously patronizing attitude towards men! Hexers even looked down on the men serving in the Big Two! That took a lot of guts!

Gloriana continued to elaborate on how Hexers viewed men and boys. While Ves had already read up on the topic, hearing Gloriana confirm many of his worst impressions was a real eye opener.

During the conversation, Ves relaxed a bit and took the initiative to cozy up to Gloriana. She was obviously pleased with his actions and melted against his side.

Ves no longer held on to his anger. He simply couldn't. While Gloriana made a mistake, Ves couldn't completely fault her for it considering what she wanted to achieve.

Even as Gloriana continued to describe all of the deplorable ways Hexers treated boys, she frequently reminded him that she would never treat him in this fashion.

"Is your attitude even acceptable to the Hexers back home?" Ves curiously asked.

She shook her head. "Not exactly. That's why I've been working so hard to change people's impressions of us. As long as everyone accepts that we belong together, we have a lot more leeway. Once the Hegemony beats the Coalition, this entire star sector will fall in our hands! By then, it will be important to gain enough approval."

Ves briefly smirked. If the Hegemony really beat the Coalition, then Ves did not intend to return to the Komodo Star Sector. Let the Hexers transform the rest of the star sector into a society where women reigned supreme. Ves would be long gone by then!

He didn't mention his intentions to his girlfriend. Not yet. He could clearly tell that Gloriana was quite attached to the Hegemony. The thought of leaving her home state and the Wodin Dynasty behind to accompany him elsewhere was still a very bold suggestion.

The key to resolving this situation was to deepen his relationship with Gloriana. He needed to make her more attached to him than her home state. Once Ves confronted her with a choice, she would likely choose the lesser of two evils and opt to stay with him rather than to return to her home state.

Ves wouldn't have to live in a society where men were treated like irresponsible boys!

The biggest reason why Ves was still reluctant to raise this topic with Gloriana was that it would be unfair to force a binary choice on her. Ves even considered it outright manipulative.

Yet.. between his own wellbeing and Gloriana's wellbeing, Ves did not feel guilty at all in choosing to advance his own interests.

He was really doing Gloriana a favor, actually. The sooner he pulled her out of the reach of Hexer society, the faster he could change her impression of men and boys.

"Are we okay now, Ves?" Gloriana looked in his eyes.

Ves nodded. "I think so."

Both of them came closer and kissed. The pure love that radiated from their lips caused both of them to sink into each other.

They separated after a short while because Melody was already starting to make some noises.

"We should get back to work." Ves suggested. "William Urbesh will probably wake up soon. We'll have to study his condition and see if he's fit to undergo examinations."

"What did you exactly do to him, anyway? I still don't understand."

"It's not something I can easily explain. It's too fantastical and obscure. I just hope that William has at least reached a state where he can actually fight back when faced with an opponent."

This was not a good place for him to describe what he did to William. He didn't mind sharing some more details, but that would have to wait until he was in a better and more trusting mood.

"Ves?"

"Yes, Gloriana?"

"I'll make up for what I've done."

"You don't have to. I'm already fine as long as you don't repeat your mistakes."

She vigorously shook her head. "That's not enough! I really made you angry. I realize that. Even if you held yourself back, I knew you were about to explode on me yesterday."

"It's fine." Ves caressed her hand. "I don't want to hurt you."

Gloriana sighed. "That just makes me feel more bad about what happened. Just you wait, Ves. I'll be sure to come up with something that will make you happy!"

Ves dismissed her words. She didn't need to do anything special. As long as she adjusted her behavior a bit, that was enough to make him happy.

The two eventually stood up and exited the mansion. This incident had already taken up enough of their time. They had a lot of work to do!

Chapter 1568 Mild Side Effects

Once Ves and Gloriana reached the Mech Nursery, they stopped by the infirmary to check up on William.

The Urbesh clansman still hadn't woken up, but there were some encouraging signs. His brain activity began to normalize. The doctors predicted that he would wake up within two or three days.

If William still hadn't woken up by that time, then he needed to be moved to a better-equipped hospital in Bentheim.

Ves preferred it if they didn't have to resort to this cumbersome movement. Not only would it take time to get William back to Cloudy Curtain, there was a chance that William would find some way to escape his clutches.

No test subject was allowed to run from Ves before he was done with his experiments!

"I think William will be fine." Gloriana remarked and gestured at some of the doctors wearing different uniforms. "I've assigned some of my own men to facilitate his care."

Ves noticed that. Some of the medical equipment in the infirmary looked very different.

While he didn't mind the changes, it rankled Ves a bit that she didn't ask for his permission.

"Gloriana... I thought we talked about this. Don't make any unilateral decisions when it concerns us both. The Mech Nursery is still my property."

"Ah, I'm sorry. It slipped my mind."

Ves could already tell that this would be a recurring habit of his girlfriend. Whenever she saw something imperfect that she could address, she would go ahead and fix the problem in her own way.

The root problem with Gloriana was that she was far too used to acting decisively that asking for his approval was still something alien to her. Perhaps she was capable of deferring to others, but the only people she answered to was her mother or other authoritative women.

Even Gloriana stated that she didn't see Ves as a boy, she was very much a Hexer. Her unconscious bias against men and boys still affected her conduct while she stayed with him on Cloudy Curtain.

He foresaw a need to have another serious talk with Gloriana. Not now, though. He wasn't in the mood right now.

Once Ves and Gloriana headed down to their lab, they convened together with the four Larkinson seeds.

They hadn't been staying idle all this time. Ketis had been attentive in guiding their studies while the others were preoccupied with other matters.

"How are the kids, Ketis?" He asked.

"They're all very bright." She replied with a smile. "Not as smart as me, but at their age they're already quite impressive."

Ves turned towards the four Larkinson teenagers and studied them with a scrutinizing gaze.

As expected, none of them could keep their composure when their idol studied them in this manner.

He didn't stare at them because he wanted to intimidate them. Instead, he was looking out for certain abnormal signs.

He finally managed to spot something abnormal. Maikel Larkinson's neck featured a very faint blue mottled pattern.

No normal human possessed skin that looked like this. Unless it was a bruise, it was very likely that Ves detected a disconcerting sign!

"Did any of you undergo genetic modification?"

All four Larkinsons nodded.

"Yes, sir." Rennie Larkinson answered. "Before we got sent to Cloudy Curtain, our family sent us all to an exclusive gene clinic at Rittersberg. The clinic is very renowned there for selling genetic mod templates that increases intelligence when applied to someone's genes."

"I see." Ves said flatly. "How much did it cost?"

"Around 80 million credits per operation."

"That's a very significant amount of money to invest in a person."

Zanthar Larkinson confidently smiled. "Our family is very hopeful about us. We were all doing very well at school before we've been selected to study under you. Now that our

genes have improved, I have no problem with keeping up with my studies while spending lots of time here!"

The other three Larkinsons nodded in agreement.

Ves sighed and placed his hands against his hips. "What about the side effects? There's always a catch."

The four of them exchanged awkward glances.

"Tell me now, or I'll ask your parents. Either way, I'll find out."

"You don't have to, sir. We'll tell you. There's a bunch of side effects, but the main one is that we need to hydrate ourselves more often. The gene mod template was derived from an aquatic species."

"Well, that doesn't sound so bad. What else?"

A bunch of other quirks and warnings followed. None of the potential side effects sounded very serious to Ves. No wonder it cost 80 million bright credits per operation at pre-inflation levels.

The side effects were severe enough to make them a bit bothersome, but not so cumbersome to require a reduction in price.

It wasn't really that expensive to apply a gene mod template to someone. The main reason why the price was jacked up so much was that the templates were often licensed from biotech companies at exorbitant prices.

The experts in genetic modification that were qualified to conduct such operations were also very hard to come by. It took a lot of study and training for people to become capable of applying genetic treatments to a variety of different people.

Once Ves finished questioning the four kids, he turned to Gloriana. "What do you think?"

"The template doesn't sound very good by my standards, but its footprint isn't very big. I think there's a lot more room for improvement and alterations. The genes of these kids aren't set in stone yet."

That relieved Ves a little. He was afraid that the Larkinsons had inadvertently ruined the future of their little seeds. Fortunately, they already took these issues into account.

"Are you okay with our genetic mod template, sir?"

"It's fine." Ves casually waved his hand in dismissal. "Genetic augmentation is something that is very common in the upper ranks of society. If you ever find yourself in a position where you can go further, then continued augmentation is pretty much essential. You have to make sure that you apply the right treatments to your genes. I'll talk to the Larkinsons about this later so they'll refrain from doing this again. As for you, don't undergo any further augmentation unless I say so. I'll kick you out myself if I find out you went behind my back!"

"Why are you making such a big fuss out of it? Isn't it good that we've all become smarter?" Maisie Larkinson asked in confusion.

"Not every gene mod template is as good." Ketis answered for Ves. "I can speak from personal experience that applying the wrong templates on you can potentially lock your future or ruin your life. I managed to correct my mistake, but many other people are stuck with their choices for life."

Ves nodded in appreciation towards Ketis. "She's right. Reckless genetic modification is one of the reasons why the second half of the Age of Conquest became such an awful time was because the cutting-edge gene treatments turned many leaders mad!"

"That's in the past, right? Genetic modification is a lot more regulated these days."

Ves and Ketis scoffed. Even Gloriana slightly shook her head!

"Naive!" Ves shouted. "Genetic modification is just as dangerous as before. The same technologies from back then are being used today! The only difference is that geneticists are a lot more careful and actually pay some attention to the repercussions of their works. That doesn't mean that they've managed to remove the effect their treatments have on someone's personality and emotions."

Ves, Ketis and Gloriana each lectured about this topic to the four seeds. Maikel, Maisie, Rennie and Zanthar all grew more grave when they learned how much they risked when the Larkinsons paid for their gene augments.

If the Larkinsons hadn't been diligent enough and paid so much money, they could have all been screwed!

After an hour of lecturing, Ves clapped his hands.

"That's enough I think. We're mech designers, not geneticists. Let's turn back to our work. You four can sit back and listen while we discuss our next projects, okay?"

The four seeds nodded. Obviously, this was not the time for them to raise their hands to ask questions or provide suggestions.

Seeing that the four Larkinsons understood his intentions, Ves turned to Ketis and Gloriana. "Alright, let's get to the next three projects I want to start. You're all up to date on the request issued by MinDef, right?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Then let's talk." He said. "Out of the four variants that MinDef suggested, Gloriana and I have already ruled out the Worthy Soldier. Its concept deviates so much from the Desolate Soldier that it actually calls for designing an entirely new mech."

"Maybe that was what the government was after." Ketis speculated. "If you fell for their trick, then they would have pretty much gotten an original mech design for the price of a variant."

Ves harrumphed. "If they think I'm stupid enough to fall for that trick, then they've severely underestimated me. Let's put that aside and focus on the variants that I've agreed upon."

The three of them began to discuss their thoughts and expectations on the Prideful Soldier, Militant Soldier and Peaceful Soldier.

"I'm not really digging those names." Ketis remarked. "Peaceful Soldier doesn't match my impression of the Planetary Guard. Maybe we should call it by another name?"

Ves shrugged. "If you have any suggestions, then feel free to raise them. I think it's a decent name."

He did not say that because he coincidentally owned a custom ballistic pistol called the Peaceful Repose.

"I don't have much of an opinion on the names. What I'm worried about is how much time we need to spend on developing these variants." Gloriana stated. "Just look at the list of requirements for the militant Soldier and Peaceful Soldier. They're very divergent from the original Desolate Soldier. We'll have to incorporate entirely new components and redesign the internal architecture of those mechs from the ground up. Even if the variants resemble the base model on the outside, their insides won't be anything alike!"

"I know it's a lot of work, but we're mech designers." Ves replied. "I think we can finish these projects in a couple of months, especially if we run them concurrently. In fact, I can finish the Prideful Soldier in a matter of weeks. The demands for this variant are by far the lightest."

Ves could retain much of the same design while substituting some components with cheaper equivalents. He also had to tweak its X-Factor so that it was not as obnoxiously pure.

Apparently, gangs and other underground organizations really didn't like it when their mech pilots acted like goody two shoes.

Both Gloriana and Ketis saw no problem with that.

"We still need some help if we want to run two projects at the same time." Ketis remarked. "Neither Gloriana and I are very useful in this project."

Ketis specialized in swords and swordsman mechs, while Gloriana's strength lay in custom mechs. Neither of them could showcase their full ability in projects centered around mass market mechs.

"I have a suggestion." Gloriana raised her head. "The government settled lots of refugees on this planet, right? Why don't we visit the local administration and see what kind of people have ended up here. There's bound to be a number of destitute mech designers among the refugees who have fled their fallen states. Maybe we can offer them all a job."

Ves looked skeptical. "I'm not sure if any mech designer is among the refugees here. They're not exactly average people. Those who are good enough have probably found better passage, while those who don't meet my standards are better left at the temporary farming settlements."

"That's just your opinion, Ves. Who knows what kind of hidden gems are hidden in the masses. I think we should head out and look for useful people to recruit. This is a great chance!"

Though Ves wasn't initially sold on the idea, he became more and more intrigued as Gloriana advocated for this suggestion.

Was there really a treasure hidden among the refugees?

Chapter 1569 Prideful Soldier

The suggestion to scout useful mech designers and other notable helpers sounded intriguing to Ves.

Now that he thought about it, many of the refugees fled in haste. They came from all walks of life, but because of the crisis they had all devolved into confused and frightened humans.

The sandman did not discriminate by wealth, class, rank or profession. The tides of sand washed over everyone regardless of their human qualities!

He briefly checked his comm to research his options.

A problem quickly emerged. He found out that he couldn't just hop into a shuttle and fly to one of the many recently-built farming settlements to pick up a useful refugee or two or something.

Only approved vehicles were allowed to approach the settlements!

The government strictly wanted to cordon them off until they systematically processed the destitute foreigners!

"This is a policy from the central government, so it's not possible to gain access by bribing the local politicians." Ves noted. "I think they want first dibs on the talents and highly-skilled people."

Ketis tilted her head. "Can't we just sneak inside and smuggle out the people we want?"

"We'll get into legal trouble if we do that. The government hasn't sorted the refugees yet, but they did perform some basic registrations, which included taking names, images, blood samples and etc. We'll be in a fair amount of trouble if our actions get exposed."

"Why not ask for a favor from the central government?" Gloriana suggested. "Didn't you say that the Bright Republic sees you as an asset now? Something as small as claiming a number of refugees is trivial in their eyes. Out of the billions and maybe trillions of refugees your state received, I don't think they'll mind letting a handful of them go beforehand."

"Hmm.. I think you have a point. This might be a hidden opportunity for those with connections or favored by the Republic to obtain some benefits."

The state definitely wouldn't quibble since they already employed a lot of talents. What the government probably wanted to achieve was to reward the power players who made the courageous decision to support the Bright Republic in its time of need.

"I'll tell Benny to make the arrangements." Ves stated and composed a quick message to Gavin.

He saw no need to contact the relevant officials in person, though he suggested his assistant to approach Leland first. Flashlight alone could probably accomplish the job.

Gavin and Leland belonged to the same side anyway, so Ves did not expect any problems from that end.

"Damn spies." He muttered.

"What was that, Ves?"

"Ah, nothing. Anyway, let's leave the refugee recruitment aside for the moment. Regardless if we manage to recruit a couple of new mech designers, we still have to integrate them into our organization. That will take a month or so at least. So for now, let's just assume it's just the three of us working on the three variant projects."

That was a paltry amount of manpower for three different projects. Even if the Proudful Soldier required relatively little work, the other two variants could have been standalone mech designs due to all of the work they demanded.

Time management was a very important aspect of project management. Ves was very well aware that the sandman invasion imposed very harsh time constraints on any mech designer.

Mech pilots needed his new variants as soon as possible! The longer it took for him to complete their designs, the more opportunities he missed to expand his influence!

After an extensive discussion, Ves and the other two mech designers formed a basic plan.

First, they would allocate a single week to design and release the Proudful Soldier.

Second, they would work concurrently on the Militant Soldier and the Peaceful Soldier project. Although both of them were very different projects that required different approaches, Ves believed he could manage to juggle two of the projects at once.

"It will be a bit challenging for us to match our mental focus on the right project at the right times." Ves warned Ketis and Gloriana. "However, this is also a form of training for us. Maintaining concentration is one of the key demands of working on projects where I'm involved."

Both of them had worked with Ves long enough to realize this condition. The girls were also smart enough to infer some of the things that Ves only hinted at. Gloriana especially caught on fast due to her unwavering belief in his abilities.

"We'll have to alternate on the projects in unison." Gloriana remarked. "If Ves and I work separately, then we won't be able to achieve the synergy we want. Ketis here can make some checks and refinements on the other project in the meantime. What do the two of you think?"

Ves strongly agreed, though Ketis appeared more reluctant. She was pretty much being sidelined, but that was also because her design ability couldn't catch up to the two Journeymen.

Overall, he was fine with this approach. While juggling multiple projects at the same time imposed a mental burden on all of them, sometimes it was better to pause working on a project.

The extra time allowed them to reflect over their design choices even if they worked on something else.

There was no room for patient deliberation if they constantly rushed to complete a single project at a time. A lengthy pause would just extend the time of completion.

"Alright!" Ves clapped with a smile. "Now that we formed a plan, let's get to work! We should tackle the Proudful Soldier first!"

Ves reread the document sent by the Ministry of Defense.

"The goal of the Proudful Soldier is to develop an alternative to the Dutiful Soldier. Mindef has outlined some suggestions, but we don't have to follow all of them. The only basic requirements that we have to follow is to make it cheaper and less obnoxious than the base model."

"What does it mean to make a less obnoxious design?" Gloriana asked in confusion.

"Think of the target audience of this variant. It has to be made suitable for the thugs and lowlives of the mech community. Think of gangs, dark mercenaries, underground organizations and even pirates!"

"Even pirates?!" She gasped.

She wasn't the only one who looked shocked. The four Larkinson seeds all became frightened at the mere mention of this dirty word!

As for Ketis, she controlled her reaction as well. Her interest had obviously been piqued, but she did her best to camouflage her true feelings on the matter.

"Even pirates." Ves slowly repeated, emphasizing the seriousness of the matter. "Right now, a lot of pirate gangs that used to prey on human trade vessels and settlements are no different from us, victims of the sandman invasion. While many of them have fled to the inner star sector, plenty of them have decided to stick around and fight the sandmen for whatever reason. The Bright Republic and many other states have offered amnesty to those who are willing to put their lives at risk to defeat the sandmen!"

Everyone gasped. It was unthinkable for all of them to forgive the heartless pirates. The MTA and CFA always demolished them on sight whenever they encountered the cruel and lawless scum!

"Are you surprised?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "You shouldn't be. The third and fourth line of defense are probably going to be pushed to the brink. If ten thousand pirate mechs are added to the frontlines, then that can make a crucial difference! Every mech counts!"

He knew almost as well as Ketis that pirates differed enormously from each other. Some were pure scum and filth. Others were noble but helpless in their lot in life. Ves did not mind if the latter redeemed themselves in the fight against the sandmen.

At this stage, the Bright Republic couldn't afford to quibble over the legal status of those who could assist!

Every mech counted!

"Do pirates even want to purchase our mech?" Ketis asked. "Usually, many pirate gangs are rather poor. They like to reuse older mechs because they don't have the funds to purchase new ones. Now that many of them have fled from the frontier or their home bases, it's very likely that they've been forced to abandon some of their wealth."

"The Proudful Soldier ought to be 25 percent cheaper than the base model. That amounts to 15 million bright credits at pre-inflation prices."

That would put it in the lower end of the budget price range. Such a price was still a short distance away from bargain bin territory, which was what pirates usually preferred.

Ketis immediately shook her head. "Too expensive."

"I'm not going to make the Proudful Soldier any cheaper, Ketis. That would mean a more extensive overhaul which we can't afford right now. Besides, the Proudful Soldier mainly targets established gangs and underground organizations. The government wants to mobilize as much of them as possible to assist in the defense."

That made the price a bit more reasonable.

Making the mech cheaper not only allowed more people to buy a product of the Soldier line, but also ensured they wouldn't get anything too good. A 25 percent reduction in cost meant that its performance would also sink.

When Proudful Soldiers were pitted against Desolate Soldiers, the latter would always win handedly. Considering that the latter was also favored by legitimate groups, this was exactly what the government wanted.

The Proudful Soldiers only had to be decent enough to fight against the sandmen! Anything else was not important!

The second major change that Ves had to implement was altering its obnoxiously pure aura. To do that, Ves would have to tinker with the X-Factor.

He already had a few ideas he wanted to implement immediately.

He first tasked Gloriana and Ketis with finding cheaper substitute components to license. The two women sat behind a terminal and browsed the MTA's virtual catalog, leaving Ves alone to perform his own assignment.

Ever since he first heard about MinDef's assignment, he already settled on his choice on how to tweak the X-Factor of the Proudful Soldier.

"It's pretty much in the name." He smirked and patted his overcoat.

He concentrated his mind and focused on the spiritual fragment residing in his clothing. Zeigra's perpetually-angry spiritual fragment still hated Ves to the bone.

"It's time to pay some rent, boy."

Ves effortlessly shaped a spiritual projection into a knife and cut a very delicate amount of spiritual energy from the fragment. The mote of spirituality he obtained from Zeigra was very small, but sufficient for his purposes.

He stored the mote in his mind and began to construct some extra images to influence what kind of flavors he wanted to add to the Proudful Soldier.

Pride. Aggression. Contempt.

Ves infused these abstract images with a hefty dose of spiritual energy, giving them a lot of weight. Once he was done, he wrapped them around Zeigra's spiritual mote so that they would all get used to each other.

"That was easy."

Ves only needed to take one final step before he was done arranging the design spirits of his variant. He decided to leave it to the end.

"This is the advantage of accumulation." Ves grinned. "I've already done most of the hard work beforehand."

The more design spirits he employed, the more he could mix and match them together in various ways.

He just had to build up his initial collection first. Once he formed thirty or so different design spirits, Ves no longer had to hunt for newer ones every time he wanted to design

a new mech. He could just keep reusing his existing ones until he was faced with a situation where no spiritual entity, fragment or product fit the mech he wanted to design!

Of course, Ves was a long way from reaching that point. The only reason why he had it easier right now was that he was working on a variant instead of a completely new mech.

Chapter 1570 Abnormal Sandman Fleets

The Coman Federation was splintering apart. Having long adopted a superior attitude, the transhuman fanatics hadn't been able to solicit the Bright Republic or other neighboring states to assist in its defense.

The Comen had been left on their own to face the brunt of the sandman invasion. No matter how much they trusted their bionic augmentations, implants and artificial limbs hardly made any difference in fighting off the sandmen!

In fact, the sandman devoured the heavily-augmented Comen much more eagerly than normal people!

Engulfing flesh and blood hardly yielded anything useful to the silicon-based lifeforms. They would much rather eat energy sources and valuable metals, something which most bionic augmentations possessed in spades!

Something unexpected happened. The sandmen devoured the Coman Federation with much more fervor than anyone initially expected! Their eagerness to wipe out the Comen led them to attack their star systems with a bit more urgency than normal.

The increased pressure was too much for the Federation. Not only did the increased pressure lead to a greater number of desertions and flight, the Comen also lost their star systems at a rapid rate.

Within a month, the Coman Federation as an independent state ceased to exist! All that was left was a collection of splintering star systems which became engulfed in total chaos! Every Coman left behind desperately tried to flee their crumbling homes, but all the starships of the Federation had already left by now!

Countless Comen died from the tides of sand every day. The messages and recordings transmitted by the sobbing civilians flooded the galactic net. It was as if almost every doomed person wanted to leave proof of their existence.

Even if they died, they would not be forgotten! Their names, faces and voices were all included in a virtual memorial that continuously registered an alarming influx of entries!

Due to the rapid collapse of the Coman Federation, the Bright Republic began to experience more than a couple of sporadic sandmen fleets.

The Bright Republic's war against the sandman had commenced in earnest.

During the initial battles, existing rifleman mechs formed the Republic's mainstay. These mechs already existed long before the crisis and their mech pilots spent years to get in tune with the machines.

Only some of the new rifleman mechs saw battle. Nonetheless, their performance during these initial battles already proved that they were sufficient for the job.

Against the sandmen, the quality of the mech did not matter as much. As long as a mech could fly in space and fire out kinetic or ballistic rounds, then they were already useful!

Having learned from the lessons of the states that fell before, the Bright Republic allocated most of its resources into defeating the sandmen in space. While the government still fortified the surfaces of important planets such as Bentheim, it largely gave up on reinforcing the surfaces of lesser planets.

It was just too difficult to defeat the sandman under the various limitations of landbound combat!

Everyone started to put more emphasis on spaceborn mechs that could fight the sandmen at a distance.

Mechs like the Desolate Soldier began to showcase their capabilities during actual combat.

In one corner of the Bright Republic, a half-company of Desolate Soldiers calmly fired at the sandmen in steady, synchronized volleys. The sandman vessel they targeted continually lost significant chunks of sand as the explosive shells blasted them out into space!

However, the scale of the explosions paled in comparison to the mass and volume of a sandman vessel!

Not only that, but there were six of them orbiting an even greater sandman mothership!

The only upside to fighting a standard sandman fleet like this was that their ranged offensive power was very poor. Though the sandman vessels fired powerful lasers, their firing rate left much to be desired.

This gave the twenty-or-so Desolate Soldiers plenty of time to whittle down the advancing sandmen.

"Keep up the fight, men." A mercenary captain shouted over the communication channel. "There's a vulnerable planet behind us! If the sandmen reach the surface, all of the people who are living there will die!"

His words gained more strength due to the collective auras working together to amplify their sense of duty.

Compared to the other units resisting the sandmen that invaded this rural star system, the half-company of Desolate Soldiers immediately distinguished themselves.

The Rescue Particle Generator module placed at their 'hearts' caused them to look especially valiant. While the mechs themselves weren't very impressive, the orange modules released bright red vapor trails that marked their passage in space.

With around twenty trails forming in unison, the half-company of Desolate Soldiers clearly attracted the most attention!

Their performance stood in stark contrast to the other units participating in this battle. Only the small detachment from the Mech Corps fought the sandmen more valiantly than the commercial mechs!

"We are the light in the dark! We shall not let a bunch of commercial mechs upstage our military machines! Fight harder!"

The competition from the Desolate Soldiers spurred the detachment from the Mech Corps to fight even harder!

However, not every unit was doing so well right now.

Even if the other units were made up of more expensive mechs, the fear and stress of battle against an implacable foe such as the sandmen took a significant toll on their courage.

Lasers struck out every couple of minutes. These bright red beams were far stronger than the typical laser beams fired by mechs. They were so powerful in fact that the beams often melted through the torso of a mech, instantly wrecking it and harvesting the life of the mech pilot inside the vaporized cockpit!

"Larry! No!"

"Hang on, Cassie! Keep firing your rifle! Larry wouldn't want you to break down in the middle of a battle!"

Every mech pilot participating in the current battle had to keep their composure. That was getting harder and harder to do as the strain on them increased.

Each bright laser beam that lit up the battlefield promised guaranteed death upon getting hit!

Just as a formation of mercenaries began to grow increasingly more ragged, a couple of Desolate Soldiers arrived.

The reinforcement of a couple of mechs ordinarily wouldn't achieve much of an effect. In fact, adding unfamiliar elements to another outfit was usually a recipe for disaster!

No one liked to fight too close alongside strangers!

Yet this time, the beleaguered mercenaries did not react too negatively at the addition despite their lack of consent.

Why? Because the auras they brought instantly relieved some of the pressure subjected to them! Each and every mercenary suddenly became more resilient.

The pressure subjected to them didn't feel so bad all of a sudden!

"So the rumors are true! Those strange mechs that are on the news all the time really do help in battle!"

"Focus on your mission, men!"

"Yes, sir!"

Soon enough, the sandman vessels were whittled down one by one. Numerous mechs met their end after a giant laser passed through their frames, but even so the survivors never wavered in their discipline.

At the cost of eleven mechs and eight precious mech pilots, the defense force managed to repel the sandman fleet.

By itself, the battle ended up in a massive victory for the humans. The sandman fleet possessed a lot of power, but its poor configuration and battle tactics meant that much of its potential had never been utilized!

Nonetheless, this was just one of many sandman fleets about to batter the Bright Republic. The opening act had just begun, and thousands of sandman fleets would soon arrive to devour every single occupied star system!

With so many battles in store, the attrition would become unimaginably brutal.

Almost no battle ended without at least a couple of casualties! No matter how well the defenders fought off the sandmen, at least a number of mechs and mech pilots lost their lives!

With how immense the sandman civilization measured, the aliens had more than enough sandman fleets to overrun entire states!

"Not bad, but it could be better."

After the battle ended, Ves wiped his hand, clearing away the footage. He leaned back on his chair and placed his boots on his desk.

"It was their first battle." Gavin noted as he fiddled a bit with his data pad.

"The defenders in that recording simply faced a bog-standard sandman fleet!" Ves retorted. "I've seen how easily they succumb when I was assigned to the Vandals!"

Ves did not fail to see that the performance of the mercenaries fell short. As the battle went on, their salvos had grown ragged. Mech pilots fired their rifles too rapidly, causing them to jam, run out too fast or disrupt the rhythm of the coordinated salvos.

"The important thing now is that this is prime footage that shows the value of our Desolate Soldiers! Whether gathered together or dispersed throughout an allied force, their effects have proven pivotal in keeping up morale!"

"I'm glad that my customers are using my products in the ways I intended them to be used." Ves smiled in satisfaction.

He expected that some of his customers would misunderstand or misuse the special qualities of his Desolate Soldiers, but the outfit that employed them in the battle surprised him. They already knew how to best employ them on the battlefield!

"Many battle recordings are already being posted on the galactic net. Many news portals have broadcasted clips on their own platform."

"Let me guess, Benny. The sight of my Desolate Soldiers flying backwards while colorful stripes of vapor are generated from their chests makes for a very striking image, right?"

"Exactly! Your choice of applying this module in this fashion has worked out great! All the news portals and the people watching the footage can't get enough of them! The more Desolate Soldiers in a formation, the grander this sight becomes! It has boosted the demand for our mechs even further!"

The LMC was well on track to sell over 100,000 Desolate Soldiers two months after release! All of the free publicity helped immensely in propagating the use of this brand-new mech model!

The Desolate Soldiers even started to steal the thunder from other mechs designed by well-known Seniors!

Even though their mech designs showcased their own strengths, much of it wasn't really relevant against a stupid foe like the sandmen!

Ves did his best to avoid becoming conceited, though. It was impossible for the established competition to accept the rise of an upstart mech designed by a mere Journeyman.

One of the reasons why he reserved his judgement was that the sandmen fleets had already begun to improve and evolve.

Every sandman admiral started off from a standard template. They were like rookies who had never experienced any combat in their lives.

However, as long as they survived a couple of battles, the stupid sandman admirals would learn a lesson or two. In response to the tactics that their enemies have employed against them, these sandman leaders would form various countermeasures.

These experienced sandman admirals were the biggest threats to the Bright Republic!

Some would split up their sandmen into thousands of smaller globs. Others would merge into one titanic entity. Already, the sandmen had already exhibited a lot of variety.

These mainstays of the sandman invasion force had emerged continuously as they succeeded in overrunning the border states.

Even if a lot of sandman fleets had already been defeated, the addition of these abnormal sandman fleets only increased the danger!

For this reason, better-performing mechs still played an important role. The Desolate Soldier was not the only viable mech by far. It was just that it performed very well against the most common form of sandmen.

Whether the Desolate Soldier would be able to hold up against more complex sandman fleets remained to be seen.

"Keep an eye on how many abnormal fleets show up in the Bright Republic." Ves ordered his assistant. "If there are too much of them, then our Desolate Soldiers might not be enough!"

Gavin nodded. "Will do, boss. I think you should have more faith in your product, though. Everyone fears fighting against a tricky sandman admiral. Having your mechs around would do wonders to stave off panic."

He had a point.

"We'll see."