

### **Chapter 1491 No Refunds**

A masked man stepped inside an isolated mech bay aboard a ship. He walked forward, his boots echoing against the scuffed deck, until he reached the mech that had recently been unpacked.

"When I heard our son prepared a gift, I did not expect to receive a tiger mech." The masked figure remarked as he studied the Devil Tiger with a critical eye. "Why do I have the feeling that this gift is not entirely planned?"

A small figure appeared alongside him. The crystalline woman wearing an elegant gown smiled up at the ferocious-looking tiger mech.

"This mech is a labor of love. From son to father, from mech designer to mech pilot, Ves hasn't forgotten about you. Though I don't pretend to understand much about mechs, I can immediately tell that this Devil Tiger will be the key to our ascension."

Though the formless mask hid Ryncol's expression, his body language clearly conveyed his skepticism.

There was nothing wrong with the Devil Tiger. From his own knowledge of mechs, he immediately recognized that the mech in front of him was very powerful and expensive.

In addition, he vaguely sensed something formidable about the mech. He couldn't quite describe what he was feeling, but as someone who piloted mechs for a living, the Devil Tiger was definitely a machine that demanded attention!

However, no matter how impressive the mech appeared, there was one huge problem.

"I don't pilot bestial mechs, honey. While this tiger mech is very impressive, I only pilot humanoid mechs."

Cynthia Larkinson grinned. "Haven't you been learning how to pilot other mechs? With the help I've provided to you, you've been improving at a rapid pace."

"That's because I've spent more than six years trying to become accustomed to piloting spaceborn mechs!" The Dark Cleaver let out an exasperated breath. "Most battles in the Nyxian Gap take place in space. If I didn't work so hard in becoming more proficient in piloting spaceborn mechs, I would have never been able to earn the respect of my men and take over the Oblivion Hand."

As a Larkinson, he possessed a much greater foundation than regular mech pilots, let alone the badly-trained pirates of the Nyxian Gap. He already possessed a basic level of proficiency in piloting spaceborn mechs, but it took several years of intensive piloting and training sessions for him to reach the level of proficiency reached by Larkinsons who specialized in piloting spaceborn mechs.

To be honest, Ryncol still wasn't comfortable with piloting a mech in space. The lack of solid ground underneath the feet of his mech often made him feel lost and adrift.

He missed fighting on stable ground. Distances were smaller, giving melee mech pilots such as him a lot more opportunity to close in to the enemy.

Though he still led the Oblivion Hand in battle after he became its commander, his mech mostly floated in the rear while the ranged mechs under his command pelted their opponents to death.

Ever since the Dark Cleaver took command of the Oblivion Hand, they never lost a battle. With someone as mysterious as his wife scouting their enemies and sabotaging them prior to battle, the Oblivion Hand always held the upper hand.

The continuous string of victories had propelled the Oblivion Hand into prominence in the Nyxian Gap. More and more pirates and other scum gave way when the Oblivion Hand passed through their space. In addition, the spoils they gained from their victories attracted an enormous amount of recruits.

Though a lot of spies and malcontents attempted to slip into their ranks, Cynthia always managed to sort them out before they did any damage.

Ryncol would have never made it this far without his wife's assistance. However, that did not mean he always went along with her plans!

"You know we can't afford to stay in a single area." He crossed his arms.

"With hunters continually following our trails, we always need to stay a step ahead. We can't afford to linger too long on the surface of a planet."

"I know that." The miniscule woman spoke. "But there's more to this mech than you realize. It's worth it for you to pilot this great machine. Do you know why? Because our son has imparted something special to this mech. Why don't you step inside the cockpit first? I'll show you why the Devil Tiger will be the key to gaining an edge against our pursuers. You might even become strong enough to defeat them in battle!"

The man sent a dubious glance at his partner. "The last time you showed me something instead of telling me something, you stuffed a bunch of pills down my throat. I was indisposed for days while my body and mind were tearing themselves apart!"

"Didn't you get better in the end? I was just doing what was best for you, honey!"

Though Ryncol was very hesitant about following his wife's instructions, eventually she managed to badger him into stepping inside the cockpit.

Once he climbed into the cockpit and sat on his chair, he quickly moaned in comfort.

"This is the most comfortably piloting chair I've ever sat upon! As expected from my son! He knows exactly how to pamper mech pilots!"

The floating crystalline form of a woman hovered happily above his head.

"The comfy chair is just the start. There's something else about this mech that will help you become stronger. Why don't you activate and interface with the Devil Tiger. There's a surprise waiting for you once you connect with your mech."

Though Ryncol only grew more and more apprehensive about following her suggestions, he couldn't muster up much resistance against his own wife.

She had never been wrong, after all.

He booted up his mech and tentatively lowered the piloting helmet onto his head. The Devil Tiger came to life. The aura hidden behind the spiritual barrier that Ves had left behind became more pronounced. A hint of it leaked past the blockage, giving the mech pilot a preview of why the Devil Tiger acquired its name.

Soon enough, the man-machine connection started to engage. Just as Ryncol started communicating with the wakening tiger mech, the diminutive crystal woman started to make her move.

She stretched her tiny arm outwards and gripped her hand into a fist. Then, she pulled something out, causing the design spirit of the Devil Tiger to scream in agony and pain!

Her hand gripped something invisible to the naked eye. Only Cynthia could see what she held. She studied what she had taken with a satisfied grin before shoving it through the helmeted head of her husband!

"AAAAAAH! WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?"

This time, it was the mech pilot's turn to scream! Despite flailing around on his piloting seat, the tiny woman remained unconcerned as he concentrated on manipulating the intangible object she shoved in the mind of the man she loved.

Several agonizing minutes passed by as Cynthia performed a series of intricate spiritual surgery. The complexity of her manipulations vastly exceeded anything that Ves could do on his own!

In fact, if Ves could see her now, he would have been astounded to see what was happening! The design spirits of his mechs were never supposed to be abused in this fashion!

Ryncol kept feeling as if his mind was being dipped into a sun as he bore through the pain that affected his deepest being! He felt as if his fundamental sense of self was being altered on the spot!

Eventually, Cynthia ended her operation. She looked a lot more exhausted than before as she expended a lot of energy and effort to accomplish her objective.

Her husband slowly recovered from the changes that took place in his mind. He immediately shut down the mech as the man-machine connection compounded his headache!

"What.. what did you do?!"

"Nothing much. I just gave you the essential ingredient that will allow you to become an expert pilot. In fact, your new state resembles that of an expert candidate! Aren't you happy, honey?"

"Happy? Do you realize how much pain I am in?! I don't feel anything like an expert candidate, and as a Larkinson I should know!"

Cynthia's tiny form floated closer and gently caressed her husband's head while she studied her handiwork. Her expression revealed no hint of an apology.

"Just bear with it. I had to be a lot more forceful than I initially thought. It's inevitable for you to suffer some side effects. The pain will fade, but the discomfort will remain."

"How am I supposed to lead the Oblivion Hand when I'm no longer comfortable in my own skin?! Fix this, please!"

"I'm sorry, honey, but you have to do the rest yourself. The side effects of my operation can only be mitigated if you integrate the changes I've made."

"How am I supposed to do that?!"

Cynthia waved her tiny hand across the cockpit. "By piloting this mech. It's connected to you, now. It hides a wellspring of strength. I've borrowed a small portion of it to empower you, but to make it your own, you need to master your new strength in order to remain in control. Piloting the Devil Tiger in battle will help you familiarize with your changes and stave off any adverse consequences."

Ryncol Larkinson was never destined to become an expert pilot. For Cynthia to give her husband the strength he needed to resist their enemies, she had to resort to desperate means in order to change his fate.

It was worth it, though. Despite the sloppiness of her operation and the many side effects that arose, she was confident her husband would be able to overcome this challenge!

What she didn't mention to her husband that she was actually gambling with his life. If he failed to master his new strength and advance to expert pilot in a couple of years, the foreign energy inserted in his mind would eventually rebel and take over his body!

This wasn't something she could meddle with any longer. With how intertwined she attached the new energy to his mind, damaging one would also damage the other. This was why she heavily emphasized to her husband to control the new addition to his mind before it gained the upper hand!

Once Ryncol's headache began to subside a bit, he turned towards his wife and glowered at her. "I hate you, you know that? You're not the woman I rescued and fell in love with back then. You did a good job in deceiving me with your innocent act and your duplicitous smiles. When I finally found out the truth, I realized that I married a lie. By then, it was too late for me to request a refund."

Though her husband was badmouthing her, Cynthia took no offense. "The love we share is real, and the son we raised is the proof of that. I'm sorry for hoodwinking you back then, but I was in desperate straits back then. It's all water under the bridge, right? Despite all the trouble we're in right now, I still love you as much as I did when you rescued me like a knight in shining armor."

Her husband sighed. "And I love you too."

Love was very mysterious. Despite the problems associated with her complicated past, the time after her early death was one of the bleakest periods in his life. When she finally returned to him in her strange form a few years ago, it was as if he rediscovered the joys of his life.

Cynthia turned grim as she cast her thoughts to the future. Aside from the incessant pursuit following after their heels, she also worried about a greater threat.

"Please bear with the changes and do your best to grow stronger quickly. You'll need that strength for what is to come."

"What are you worried about, Cynthia?"

"A powerful foe." She replied with a grim expression. "One that is great enough to force our son to run from the star sector in the future."

The Ruined Temple was not a foe to be taken lightly!

#### Chapter 1492 Cu

Back aboard the Barracuda, Ves was exploring something new as well. After several days of ignoring its presence, he finally decided to tackle the Ancient Sarcophagus.

After passing his Spirituality through the odd hindrance of the red crystal substance, he began to approach an unknown entity held within.

The closer his spiritual presence neared the unknown entity, the greater the pressure he felt. Ves got the impression that the entity resting in the center of the coffin was not entirely awake.

"It's.. different from a living entity."

Compared to the liveliness and vividness of Zeigra's spirituality, the strange and partially-obscured presence locked within the Ancient Sarcophagus was like a sleeping giant that only revealed a hint of its shadow.

Ves began to consider whether it was a good idea to probe deeper. The strength he sensed up ahead only revealed a hint of its prowess, but already his intuition was ringing tons of alarms.

The problem he faced was whether he could trust his intuition. Ordinarily, he always trusted in his intuition.

However, he didn't dare to do so this time. Ever since he suspected that an outside influence was affecting his emotions, who knew whether his intuition could still be relied upon.

"I have to move forward." He whispered to himself.

The only way to defeat the unknown was to lift the veil that obscured the truth!



His sluggish spiritual projection continued to worm its way deeper into the Ancient Sarcophagus. As soon as it reached the area which held the frozen alien body, it finally came in touch with the dormant spiritual presence locked within.

Ves sensed a formless presence.

A presence that slept.

Sleeping for eons.

Until it perceived a disturbance.

Its rest was disturbed.

The presence slowly perceived an intrusion.

An unwelcome entity had disturbed its rest.

The presence began to waken some more.

The strength it exuded rose rapidly.

Ves widened his eyes.

Lucky meowed in alarm and activated his energy claws.

A sleeping spiritual giant awoke, and became incredibly angry!

"Uh... perhaps I acted too hastily."

As soon as he decided to pull his spiritual projection back, the entity residing within the Ancient Sarcophagus released an alien transmission that could only be heard through spiritual means!

Ves perceived a jumble of alien words and concepts! Though he failed to understand the meaning behind the transmission, he still managed to perceive the underlying emotions attached to the message.

The entity resting within the Ancient Sarcophagus was angry! Angry at being disturbed! Angry that its recovery had been interrupted! Angry that some puny lifeform had the temerity to claim its resting place!

The punishment for disturbing its rest was death!

"Ah!" Ves cried and pressed his hand against his head!

The massive spiritual entity hiding inside the Ancient Sarcophagus began to savage his spiritual projection!

"No!"

Once it realized that the intruder was only an extension of someone else's spirituality, the alien presence began to capture it and hijack its connection to the source!

Ves instantly balked in horror as he felt his spiritual projection was being coopted! The connection between his mind and his projection became a guide for the alien spiritual entity!

Soon enough, a spiritual sledgehammer hit his mind! Ves screamed as he felt as if something had cracked!

The strength of the impact finally allowed him to gauge the previously dormant entity's strength. Though the alien spiritual entity hadn't fully roused itself from its slumber, the force of its spiritual attack already exceeded the strength level of an expert pilot!

In fact, the power he sensed was comparable to that of Qilanxo!

"I've disturbed an entity that's as strong as an ace pilot!"

The only reason why his mind hadn't crumbled entirely was because the alien entity was still in the process of waking up. More and more of its strength came alive as the entity reared back for a second attack!

At that instance, Ves quickly diverted some of his concentration to his surroundings. He quickly located the lockbox made of B-stone and hastily picked it up. He oriented its opening and slipped the lockbox over his head like a makeshift helmet!

The second strike threatened to crack the defenses of his mind. Yet before it hit, the attack first hit the side of his B-stone lockbox!

Though Ves looked absolutely ridiculous right now with a square, black 'helmet' over his head, his quick thinking saved him from an attack that potentially shattered the defenses of his mind!

The second strike encountered so much hindrance in trying to pass through the layers of B-stone that it lost a lot of strength and momentum by the time it managed to pass through the dampening material.

The force that finally struck his mind only whacked him with a moderate instead of an overwhelming amount of force!

"Ng!"

It still hurt, though! The exterior of his mind already suffered some cracks due to the initial attack. Every subsequent bump threatened to compound the damage.

Despite the protection provided by his B-stone helmet, the rain of attacks that followed afterwards continued to degrade his defenses!

Soon, it would crack or shatter, which would lead to unpredictable results!

Though Ves tried his best to retreat, he found out that he was stuck! The hostile alien presence hijacked the spiritual projection he inserted into the Ancient Sarcophagus and kept hold of it in order to keep him in place!

Since Ves couldn't retrieve his spiritual projection, he tried to cut it off. However, he failed as the alien entity reinforced the connection!

"It isn't working!"

In order to buy more time, he frantically diverted his spiritual energy into the defenses of his mind. While he managed to heal some of the cracks, the attacks that continued to rail against his mind continued to inflict more damage.

"Damnit! I can't run and defending will only delay the inevitable!"

He had to change his tack! Though his opponent was extremely formidable if he tried to resist it by himself, he hadn't forgotten about his preparations!

Though the B-stone lockbox placed on his head was blocking his sight, he nonetheless managed to blindly grasp at two exotics he prepared beforehand!

He placed one hand on his partially-charged P-stone and another hand on his only F-stone!

The P-stone possessed a few days worth of excess spiritual energy. Ves desperately tapped the energy locked within to stem his rapid depletion. With an extra source of spiritual energy, he managed to buy some valuable time for himself!

As for the F-stone, Ves briefly hesitated in using it. Though Ves did not believe its properties were dangerous to him, he never fully tested out its abilities.

This was because the F-stone only contained a finite amount of charged energy! Once he used that up, he had no way of recharging it! He already tried to insert his spiritual energy in the F-stone to see whether it replenished its energy, but nothing happened!

"This isn't time to be stingy!" He admonished himself. "Who cares about a unique F-stone when my very mind is at stake!"

He no longer hesitated and drew deeply on his F-stone. A strong charge entered his body and mind before fusing with his loose spiritual energy. The external charge imparted his spiritual energy with a strong offensive attribute that became more and more pronounced as Ves drew out more of the F-stone reserves!

It pained Ves enormously to use up so much of his F-stone's charge. He estimated that he drew around fifteen percent of its total charge by the time his spiritual energy became saturated. He was unable to draw out anything more from his F-stone as his spiritual energy simply couldn't accommodate anything more!

"This is the time to strike!"

Though his spiritual energy was depleting at a worrying rate, he decisively formed another spiritual projection in the shape of a sharp and deathly knife. Due to the charge it acquired, its 'sharpness' and other offensive qualities had become a lot greater than Ves could ever manage to impart by himself!

Unlike the alien spiritual entity which mindlessly continued to press its attack through the dampening material of his B-stone lockbox, Ves directed his spiritual knife downwards from his head through his neck. Only until his spiritual knife extended from the interior of his lockbox did he reorient his knife towards the Ancient Sarcophagus.

"Attack!"

With as much force as he could muster, he propelled his spiritual knife forward! As soon as it reached the red crystal exterior, it began to encounter some hindrance.

However, the knife was not deterred! Its strong offensive quality allowed it to cut through the spiritual morass without bleeding too much energy!

Like a hot knife through butter, Ves pressed the sharp spiritual projection through the red crystal substance. Within seconds, it arrived at the site where the alien entity captured his first spiritual projection!

"CUT!"

Ves wielded his spiritual knife with haste and desperation. As soon as his attack encountered the wakening spiritual presence, the spiritual blade managed to make a cut with some difficulty!

"AAH!"

The injured spiritual entity roared with pain! It transmitted a barrage of spiritual messages, though Ves completely failed to understand their meaning!

"Shut up, you stupid relic of the past!"

Seeing that his first attack had managed to damage the spiritual entity, he continued to make additional cuts. Though the wounds were fairly shallow in comparison to the formidable spiritual entity's size, Ves was not attacking it at random!

Instead, he cut the portion of the alien entity that grabbed hold of his hijacked spiritual projection.

Cut followed after cut as Ves continued to damage the area of the spiritual entity which had captured a piece of himself!

The offensive attribute imparted to his spiritual knife grew weaker after every attack. Each cut that followed after the last one began to inflict less and less damage.

However, Ves didn't worry about his weakening attacks because Ves managed to cut loose an entire portion of the alien spiritual entity!

WWOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!

A formless scream without any obvious meaning emanated from the Ancient Sarcophagus! This time, its outburst was so powerful that even Nitaa managed to perceive the cry!

The attacks raining down on Ves had paused as the alien spiritual entity convulsed in agony as it abruptly lost a fundamental piece of itself!

Ves took advantage of the reprieve by retrieving both his initial spiritual projection and his second spiritual projection in the form of a knife! Not only did he retrieve his spiritual projections, he also dragged his spoils from the wounded alien entity!

Before he returned his spiritual projections to his mind, he hastily processed the wiggling and resisting spiritual fragment he cut loose.

"There's no way I'm going to host it in my own mind!"

He pressed the fragment into his P-stone. Ves had already drained it of all of the excess spiritual energy he previously stored inside. Now that his spiritual piggy bank was empty of anything of value, he did not hesitate in forcing the violently-wiggling spiritual fragment inside!

Unfortunately, the spiritual fragment continued to resist its capture! Not only did it strain against his attempts to keep it in place, it also summoned up enough strength to overcome the suction force of the P-stone that attempted to keep the fragment in its embrace!

"I have no choice, then!"

Ves quickly removed the B-stone lockbox from his head and quickly dumped his occupied P-stone inside. Once he closed it up, he carefully studied the lockbox for a few seconds but sensed nothing leaking out.

Combining the strengths of his P-stone and B-stone was enough to keep this rebellious alien spiritual fragment in place!

Ves knew that spiritual fragments cut off from a greater whole still shared a connection between them. The strength of this connection varied, but stronger entities generally maintained a stronger grip on their spiritual fragments.

However, the B-stone lockbox interfered with this connection! Though it hadn't disappeared entirely, the alien entity was unable to divert additional strength to its spiritual fragment!

As soon as Ves completed this maneuver, he took the lockbox and F-stone and rapidly escaped the lab.

"Nitaa! Let's go! It's too dangerous here right now!"

Though she was confused at what was happening, she didn't object to the command.

As soon as they ran halfway across the interior of the Barracuda, Ves, finally slowed down.

"This should be far enough." He judged. "We're out of the danger zone, I think."

Though the entity residing inside the Ancient Sarcophagus was incredibly formidable, Ves managed to discover something important while he cut loose a spiritual fragment.

For some reason, the alien spiritual entity was anchored to the center of the crystal coffin! It was unable to exert the majority of its spiritual strength!

Ves bet that the entity trapped within the coffin could only lash out in the immediate vicinity. The further the entity exerted its strength, the more the Ancient Sarcophagus weakened its attempts!

"It's not a sarcophagus!" He abruptly realized as he straightened his thoughts. "It's a prison!"



## Chapter 1493 Accidental Spoils

Before Ves took a long rest, he made sure to move the Ancient Sarcophagus back to the vault.

He didn't dare to let any person approach the dangerous object. While Ves wasn't sure whether it could affect or threaten anyone else, Ves did not take any chances.

He approached a nearby terminal and began to take control of a number of lifter bots.

Fortunately, the alien spiritual entity residing inside Item #1255 hadn't messed with the bots. Instead of moving it back to the vault, he instead placed it near the aft of the Barracuda.

The vault was situated in the center of the corvette, allowing it to exert its influence to cover the bulk of the interior of the vessel. By placing it at the very edge of the cargo bay, right against the cargo bay hatch, the Ancient Sarcophagus would have to overcome a lot more distance in order to affect the rest of the ship.

Once he finished moving the red coffin, Ves paused for a few minutes and extended his damaged spiritual senses outward.

He sensed nothing unusual. In fact, he began to breathe a little easier now that the dread weighing on his heart had disappeared. The subtle influence that messed with his judgement and intuition had disappeared!

Ves guessed that the trapped spiritual entity was still roiling in pain. Ves had violently cut out a spiritual fragment from its whole. Unlike the last time where Qilanxo voluntarily donated a spiritual fragment to Ves, this time he took it by force!

"There is an important difference between these two instances!"

Though Ves had the sense that the trapped alien entity was stronger than Qilanxo, the two differed substantially in many ways. Aside from being powerful, they shared nothing in common.

"I have no idea what I've tangled with, but I'm pretty sure it's trapped in place."

As more and more time passed by without anything unusual taking place, Ves began to let down his guard.

Evidently, the wounded alien entity was unable or unwilling to retaliate. Even if it did launch some kind of surprise attack somehow, Ves had already prepared a precaution. He programmed an emergency command on his comm. As long as he pressed the button, the Barracuda's cargo hatch would instantly open and dump the Ancient Sarcophagus into space!

Of course, Ves really didn't want to resort to this option. Despite the threat hidden within, the Ancient Sarcophagus was worth around 20 billion bright credits! He hated the thought of throwing away all that money!

"It's one thing to throw the red coffin away while the ship is in a star system. It's another thing to throw it out of the cargo bay while we're in the middle of FTL travel!"

It was still possible to dump something out of the ship while traveling faster than light, but nobody knew whether this posed some risks to the ship.

In any case, once the Barracuda released the Ancient Sarcophagus in higher-dimensional space, it was virtually impossible to get it back! Who knew where it would drift off or whether it would even remain intact!

He was relieved that the Ancient Sarcophagus did not do anything that forced his hand.

As he commanded Nitaa to keep an eye on the object, he wearily dragged his body to his stateroom and fell onto his bed.

"Meow."

Lucky floated above Ves with concern.

"I'm fine. I just need to rest and recover. My mind took an awful beating and I expended a lot of energy trying to defend myself."

The excitement had finished, allowing Ves to take stock of what happened and what he gained from his latest dangerous experience.

First, he managed to understand the nature of the Ancient Sarcophagus. Ves wasn't even sure if it still deserved to be called as such, though it obviously preserved a seemingly dead alien body.

The formidable spiritual entity trapped within had rested inside for who knew how long. Ves wasn't sure if it was a spiritual continuation of the alien body trapped within the crystal or if it emerged long after the original body had been entombed.

"Whatever the case, it's strong and very much alive!"

It also happened to be fairly uncommunicative and extremely violent. Though Ves understood most entities, he failed to interpret the incomprehensible spiritual transmissions of the alien spiritual entity. There was a fundamental mismatch between them that didn't exist when Ves communicated with other entities!

Just like Zeigra's spirituality, the alien spiritual entity possessed an irreconcilable hatred towards Ves. Though he didn't mean to carve out a spiritual fragment, it was too late to make amends now that he did so in an extremely violent fashion.

The overall impression he got from the alien spiritual entity was one that conveyed an immense amount of power and hostility. It was as if Ves was just a mouse before a cat!

Nonetheless, the difference between their situations was that the cat was shackled to the Ancient Sarcophagus while the mouse enjoyed total freedom! This was one of the reasons why Ves shouldn't have much to fear from the alien spiritual entity he offended!

Unfortunately, their brief moment of contact and conflict didn't reveal anything more about the entity trapped within.

He did manage to extricate himself from the fight with a spiritual fragment. The P-stone locked inside his B-stone lockbox now held a very violent and uncooperative spiritual fragment.

Ves decided to keep the lockbox close and monitor it for a few days. While there was a risk in keeping it within his reach, he wanted to know immediately if the spiritual fragment managed to muster enough strength to break out of its cage.

"I don't have a lot of alternatives if my current containment measures aren't enough."

One of the issues that plagued him right now was the damage inflicted to his mind. The violent attacks against the defenses of his mind had riddled it with cracks and other imperfections. Though his mind was already in the process of healing it, Ves estimated that it would take a fair amount of time for him to recover all of the damage.

In addition, Ves also expended a decent amount of spiritual energy. Though his Grand Dynamo was intact and constantly churned out an incredible amount of spiritual energy, it still took some time for his reserves to get back up to full.

"This is going to eat up valuable time! Time which I could have used to work on my latest design project!"

Still, this wasn't his first time his mind was working at a suboptimal level. Ves believed he still had what it took to work on a new mech design. He just wouldn't be feeling very comfortable and energetic in the following week.

In his current damaged condition, it would be hard for him to become inspired or perform his work at full efficiency.

To be honest, he was quite pissed at how much damage he suffered and how it could have been worse. If not for his quick thinking, he might not even be himself anymore!

As he analyzed his attempts to probe the Ancient Sarcophagus, he realized that making direct contact with the alien spiritual entity was his biggest mistake. His curiosity towards the seemingly-slumbering entity had almost proved his undoing!

"Even if it woke up, it couldn't have done anything to me." He concluded. "It's trapped in place and can hardly exert its strength outside of the red coffin."

The main reason the alien spiritual entity managed to circumvent the restrictions of its prison was because it hijacked his spiritual projection!

The channel that formed between the two opened up a backdoor for the alien spiritual entity to exert its strength outside the coffin.

"Well, lesson learned, I guess." He sighed while continuing to lie face down on his bed. "I'll have to develop a more sophisticated probing method next time. I shouldn't expose myself in such a reckless manner against a completely unknown entity."

The alien spiritual entity's dormancy had thrown him off. Only after it started rousing from its slumber did Ves realized how badly he was outmatched.

Though Ves had never come in touch with an ace pilot in his life, he had a strong feeling that Qilanxo and the trapped alien entity both belonged to that

tier. The amount of strength they possessed clearly exceeded the bounds of expert pilots, but wasn't quite as impressive as the stories he heard about god pilots.

"Well, there is a huge amount of variance in strength between ace pilots."

This was because ace pilots were split into junior ace pilots and senior ace pilots for some reason. Despite this distinction, there weren't any other differences between the two. As long as a junior ace pilot kept improving, they wouldn't encounter any major bottlenecks that hindered their growth to senior ace pilot.

If Ves attempted to gauge their strengths, then he tentatively judged that Qilanxo was comparable to a junior ace while the trapped alien entity was comparable to a senior ace.

Its partial awakening along with the Ancient Sarcophagus shackling the bulk of its strength prevented the trapped alien entity from using its superiority to its fullest.

However, even a portion of its strength was enough to threaten Ves! He needed to be really careful about his interactions with the Ancient Sarcophagus from now on as he couldn't afford a repeat of the previous incident!

Ves winced when he thought about the F-stone. He used up 15 percent of its charge to empower his ability to damage the trapped alien entity. While he didn't regret his decision, he was afraid that he didn't have any way to make up for his loss in this area.

"From what I've seen in Cinach, F-stones are probably a lot rarer than P-stones!"

He managed to collect six P-stones but only one F-stone and B-stone so far. The latter two materials had proven vital in helping him solve his latest crisis.

As long as he accumulated more of both, he enjoyed a lot more confidence in handling dangerous spiritual threats!

"However.. if I don't manage to get more F-stones and B-stones, then my options will continue to dwindle over time."

His B-stone had proven to be very useful as a makeshift helmet to protect his mind. The trapped alien entity hadn't been smart or coherent enough to attack his mind from below.

However, would the next time be the same? If the alien entity smartened up, then Ves needed a lot more B-stones to form an armored suit that protected his entire body!

As for the F-stones, his need for them became more acute. Unlike his B-stone lockbox which he could reuse as many times as he wanted, his F-stones depleted more and more of its charge each time Ves drew upon its strength.

"If I continue to draw 15 percent of its charge with every use, then my F-stone will run out of charge after six more uses!"

This was very important to Ves, because he believed he needed its strength to continue to take advantage of the Ancient Sarcophagus.

Ever since he started his new design project, Ves had been worried whether he could successfully design a brand new spaceborn rifleman mech in two or three months.

One of the biggest bottlenecks he faced was that he lacked a convenient supply of spiritual entities!

Part of the reasons why his Aurora Titan, Transcendent Messenger and Devil Tiger designs exhibited a powerful X-Factor was because of their exceptional design spirits.

Ves wanted to impart the same level of strength to his rifleman mech design, but finding a suitable spiritual entity that could serve as its design spirit was immensely troublesome!

"However, it's different now." He grinned. "With my accidental spoils, I've saved myself the trouble of starting an exhaustive search!"

The only troublesome aspect about the spiritual fragment he captured was incredibly hostile. The alien spiritual entity hated his guts and would never cooperate with his attempts to turn its spiritual fragment into a design spirit for his upcoming mech design!

"That's okay, though! I can just use the same solution I used last time!"

Ves planned to avoid the unpleasanties related to using a hostile spiritual fragment by breaking it apart!

As long as he cut off the fragment's connection to the source and broke it up to the point where its autonomous consciousness died, then he could repurpose the pieces into a new spiritual product!

#### **Chapter 1494 Huge Reservoir**

In the following days, Ves put down most of his work and mainly relaxed as he tried to recover from his ordeal.

Though he didn't have any hobbies or leisure activities to amuse himself, he enjoyed reading industry publications and keeping up with the latest developments in the local mech community.

To Ves, working with mechs was his idea of having fun. As long as he didn't divert his thoughts to any strenuous design work, his stress levels remained low.

The passage of time allowed his mind to heal the damage that Ves incurred by clashing against the alien spiritual entity locked in the Ancient Sarcophagus.



While the damage looked ugly, this wasn't the first time Ves had gone into a scrape. His mind had gained enough resilience to know what it was doing when it was attempting to repair the damage.

What helped his recovery enormously was when Ves directed some of the abundant spiritual energy produced by the Grand Dynamo to boost the recovery effort.

Since the defenses of his mind represented an aspect of his Spirituality, then supplementing it with his own spiritual energy was like adding fuel to the fire.

His mind and spirit had grown stronger. As Ves eagerly studied the rate of repair, he estimated he wouldn't be bothered by the damage anymore after a couple more days of rest.

As Ves saw his own mind recover quickly by supplementing it with spiritual energy, he cast his thoughts back to the strange alien spiritual entity.

His brief moment of contact revealed very little about the entity. The only thing Ves really learned was that its strength exceeded his own by a huge margin but that it was also trapped inside its coffin.

Ves tried to recall the impression he got from the entity. He found its emotions and spiritual attributes to be rather opaque. A lot was lost in translation because of the sheer alienness of what he experienced.

"Is this what it's like to come into contact with a true alien?"

A lot of the spiritual entities he encountered so far consisted of humans or genetically-modified organic products developed by humans. These inextricable human links meant that Ves shared a common spiritual language with different creatures related to the human race.

Ves was not blind to his ability to communicate with cats and other creatures. In fact, it had grown stronger and more capable as he progressed his career.

He smirked. "Ketis is right. I do have a superpower. It's just that it's not as impressive as she thinks."

He developed a theory that his design philosophy not only strengthened his ability to work with mechs, but also produced various side effects related to its mechanisms.

His design philosophy mostly focused on facilitating the cooperation between humans and mechs. Trying to communicate with animals and alien creatures was either an artifact related to his design philosophy, or something that was common with powerful spiritual entities that shared a particular inclination.

"It could be both in my case." He mused. "They're probably overlapping with each other if that's the case."

He'd have to come in touch with more aliens and other spiritual entities in order to be sure. Unfortunately, the only two within reach both hated his guts.

When Ves inspected Zeigra's spiritual fragment locked inside his outfit, it mindlessly lashed out at him with an even greater fury than before!

"What have I done to you?! Isn't it time for you to let bygones be bygones?!"

The sheer fury emanating from the spiritual fragment made it impossible for Ves to have a straight conversation with the former Crown Cat.

As for the other entity, Ves was not very eager to make contact with the alien spiritual entity.

"It deserves a name. It's tiresome to call it that everytime I think about it." He rubbed his chin. "How about Nyxie?"

That settled it! If the alien spiritual entity locked within the Ancient Sarcophagus disliked its new name, then it could always lodge a complaint if it wished!

Though Nyxie was incredibly hostile and almost succeeded in shattering his mind, Ves did not resent it. In fact, Ves regarded the spiritual entity with fondness!

As Ves carefully approached the cargo bay and studied the Ancient Sarcophagus from a distance with his spiritual vision, he tentatively confirmed that Nyxie was firmly trapped inside its cage.

Once Ves gained more confidence that Nyxie wouldn't be a threat to him, he stepped closer and began to examine the spiritual entity as best he could with his passive senses.

Though he wasn't able to read much, he did manage to make some very critical observations.

First, Ves confirmed his earlier conclusions.

Nyxie was incredibly powerful. So powerful in fact that Ves didn't feel confident he could match its strength within a hundred years! Unless he advanced to Master Mech Designer or something, Nyxie would always be able to crush him on a spiritual level if it managed to shake off its shackles!

Second, Ves still hadn't been able to make sense of Nyxie's spiritual attributes, but its personality and emotions were very clear.

He gained the impression of a very distinguished alien individual who ruled over its people like a despot. Nyxie believed that it possessed a natural right to rule. Tyranny, superiority and hostility suffused the spiritual entity, making it extraordinarily difficult for Ves to find anything friendly.

"Your personality really sucks." He stated to the coffin. Nyxie probably didn't register his words. "You'd be a lot more useful to me if you aren't such a hostile bastard. I'm not your enemy!"

Unfortunately, no matter how many overtures he made, Nyxie remained as hostile as ever. The only thing that changed was that it increasingly became more dormant.

The ugly wound he carved out of Nyxie did not represent a major loss to an entity of its size and strength, but it was very unpleasant nonetheless.

What Ves found curious about Nyxie's return to slumber was that its wound started regenerating. The edges of the cavity formed by carving out a fragment became active. Bit by bit, new spiritual energy arrived from within the entity to regain what had been lost.

Ves widened his eyes as he realized the implications of this development.

"If Nyxie gets back to normal everytime I carve out a fragment, doesn't this mean that I can do this forever?"

This essentially meant that Ves had gained a renewable source of spiritual fragments! As long as he made sure that gave Nyxie enough time to recover from the damage, Ves could potentially harvest the same kind of spiritual fragments in perpetuity!

"This is a ridiculous notion!" Ves vigorously shook his head before he let his delusions get the better of him. "Nothing is for free! There has to be limits somehow."

Ves observed Nyxie's spiritual activities over several days and keenly studied its changes.

He found out that even as its wound started to close, its overall spiritual strength started to subside a bit.

The difference was extremely miniscule, and it took a lot of focused effort on his part to register the changes in the first place.

If not for his hunch that something like this might happen, he wouldn't have realized that Nyxie was becoming weaker even as it healed its wound!

It made a lot of sense to Ves. Where did it get its spiritual energy from? Ves observed the crystal coffin as best he could. Even if he didn't understand what it did besides trapping Nyxie, he was pretty sure it did not generate any spiritual energy.

"Why would a coffin or a prison have that function in the first place?"

Ves made a tentative conclusion that Nyxie was cannibalizing its own spiritual energy to heal its wound. This meant that this renewable source of spiritual fragments would not last forever and eventually exhaust itself.

He still grinned, though. "Even if my new renewable source is not as exhaustive as I thought, there is plenty to go around!"

Nyxie's sheer strength and quantity of spiritual energy was unlike anything that Ves had seen before!

Not even Qilanxo, a Sacred God who lived for hundreds of years and whose very genes had been manipulated to excel in spirituality and spiritual manipulation, could match the strength of this incredibly ancient and forgotten relic from the past!

Though Ves did not have much information to go on, he estimated that he would definitely be able to harvest fifty to a hundred spiritual fragments before Ves exhausted Nyxie as a source!

A hundred fragments!

That essentially translated to a hundred spiritually-empowered mech designs!

Though Ves could draw upon other sources, he had to go through a lot of effort to obtain them! While he already formed plans to make it easier for him

to harvest spiritual fragments or complete spiritual entities, it would take a lot of time for them to come into fruition.

Now that he had Nyxie, he obtained a very valuable stopgap solution. He only had to walk as far as to where he stored the Ancient Sarcophagus in order to harvest another spiritual fragment!

"This is worth far more than 20 billion bright credits!"

Obtaining the Ancient Sarcophagus was one of the biggest profits of his year-long tour. Obtaining a huge reservoir of spiritual fragments in a convenient package was already worth this entire excursion!

"I can add another successful gain to my list!"

His deal with Finlay back at the Circle of Mota had paid off in spades! Even if Finlay's faction misused his work and laid waste to a populated planet in the Sentinel Kingdom, Ves would still not regret what he'd done!

In his eyes, helping to develop mechs that went on to nuke an entire planet to oblivion was worth the gains he made!

This was because the Ancient Sarcophagus allowed him to design a lot of mechs in rapid tempo without getting bottlenecked by his difficulties in tracking down suitable design spirits to pair with his designs!

"It's not a perfect solution, however." He sighed as he recognized a number of huge issues.

Nyxie was uncooperative. Not only that, but Nyxie's spiritual attributes were very tyrannical and alien. Ves didn't have a good grasp of them, and not every mech design was suitable to adopt these specific attributes.

"It might be able to work with an offense-oriented mech like the Blackbeak, but I doubt Nyxie is a good fit for a defense-oriented mech like the Aurora Titan."

Nothing good would come out from a mismatch between the vision of a mech and its design spirit. His mech pilots would probably suffer from mental disorders if Ves tried to pull something like that off!

He didn't worry too much about this problem, though. This was because he already decided that if he ever made use of Nyxie's spiritual fragments, he would use them as the main raw material for his spiritual products.

"It's better to break them up rather than use them directly."

Aside from trying to remove Nyxie's hostile consciousness towards him from the fragments, Ves mainly wanted to see if he could steer its spiritual attributes in a different direction.

"Instead of accepting what I've initially obtained, I want to develop something that conforms to my intentions!"

In the context of his design philosophy, his attempts to develop an artificial spiritual product and gain greater control over its nature represented a shift towards the path of determinism.

Though it still involved the path of life, the more he intervened in the configuration of his spiritual product, the more its existence reflected his will.

"It's like programming a bot, but not quite."

He had no idea what he was doing during his first attempt at creating a spiritual product. Ves realized that he had to develop the theories on how to shape a spiritual product in a focused and deliberate manner from scratch.

However, the potential of becoming proficient in this ability was great!

Ves increasingly felt that his latest developments were threatening to spin out of his control. Reorienting himself more towards the path of determinism was a good way to ensure that he retained at least a modest grip on some of his future design spirits!

## Chapter 1495 Natural vs Artificial

Despite his many hopes for using artificial spiritual products as design spirits for his mechs, he did not consider them to be the ultimate solution to every problem.

His previous mech designs which utilized natural spiritual fragments or entities were very powerful. As long as their inclinations matched their mech designs, then the resulting combination was very powerful.

"The main advantage to resorting to products of nature is that they are already mature!"

A Sacred God like Qilanxo who grew up on Aeon Corona VII and went through countless experiences was not something an artificial spiritual product could match.

The difference between the former and the latter was that a spiritual product was completely newborn at the moment of creation. In fact, as a purely spiritual lifeform, it never enjoyed an opportunity to live a long and impactful physical existence.

This decreased their overall value compared to natural products. Having studied Vescas multiple times, Ves concluded that it was rather dimwitted and impressionable at first, so much so that he believed that it was better suited to be utilized in custom mechs rather than commercial mechs.

While he still believed that this was the case, Ves believed this problem wasn't insurmountable.

"It's still better to obtain a natural product that matches the vision of my mech design. There will always be problems if I attempt to twist something incompatible into something that barely matches my intention."

The main advantage of resorting to spiritual products rather than existing spiritual entities was that he could wipe the slate clean. Even if the spiritual



entity hated his guts, as long as Ves broke it apart and reconstructed it in something new, the resulting newborn was ripe for indoctrination.

"This is the key."

Rather than immediately insert a new spiritual product into a mech design, he needed to raise and educate it beforehand. The longer he shaped its personality and inclinations, the less susceptible it would be once it took on its role and became exposed to the chaotic thoughts of thousands of mech pilots!

What this basically meant was that Ves had to create a spiritual product in the early phases of a mech design project and needed to divert a lot of effort into educating it. Even then, it would still be rather impressionable because it simply lacked too much life experience to know what was right or wrong.

In essence, that meant that his spiritual products would still be subject to change depending on the feedback it received from the earliest customers of his new mech model.

Ves predicted that only the earliest customers mattered, because exposure to more mech pilots would rapidly mature the design spirit over time.

This gave Ves a measure of control over the evolution of his spiritual products. He just had to selectively release the first copies of his new mech models to exemplary customers.

"The first mech pilots who interface with my new mechs will essentially act as teachers and role models!"

In this way, Ves believed he could successfully address one of the most troubling aspects in his attempts to utilize spiritual products in mass-market mechs.

He left out another method of influencing his spiritual products. The problem was that it was a bit more controversial.

"If my current raw ingredients aren't sufficient, then I can always blend in an additional ingredient that contains the properties I want!"

Ves believed that he could improve the compatibility of his spiritual products if he stole a spiritual fragment from a matching expert pilot!

As long as the expert pilot specialized in the same mech type as his design project, Ves would be able to better match the spiritual attributes of the spiritual product to a particular mech design.

In fact, Ves already blended in his own spiritual energy into his spiritual products to make them more compatible to mechs. The problem though was that his spiritual attributes addressed mechs as a whole rather than specific mech archetypes.

He needed a more targeted way to influence the initial state of his spiritual products!

Ves remembered that he matched his first spiritual product, Vescas, with the Kinslayer.

Vescas happened to be formed as a result of combining the spiritual remnants of a huge cat and a tiny portion of his own spiritual energy.

The result was a spiritual product which already started off with a high degree of fit towards a tiger mech!

"This won't be the case next time!"

If the initial mix of raw ingredients wasn't enough, then Ves had to throw in something extra in order to make up for the lack of fit.

One solution he came up with was to revive his plans to borrow the strength of expert pilots!

Ves knew that stealing a spiritual fragment from an expert pilot was risky and not entirely opportune. To ensure the best result, he needed to be in fairly

close proximity to the expert pilot in question or find some way to track down their spiritual presence in the imaginary realm.

However, these challenges weren't insurmountable or even very troubling. It was easy enough for Ves to divert to the known locations of expert pilots in order to accomplish his heists.

"The bigger question is whether it's even a good idea for me to resort to this solution."

Ves knew that carving out a piece of spirituality from another person could be a damaging or traumatic experience. He wasn't really sure of the consequences of his actions, but at the very least he had set back their growth and progression for some time as their damaged spiritualities needed a lot of time to heal from their wounds.

Since expert pilots were weaker than ace pilot-like entities like Qilanxo and Nyxie, it would take a lot more time for them to recover from their losses.

"However, it doesn't have to be a lot. Just a tiny fragment is sufficient."

The spiritual fragments he obtained from Nyxie would serve as the base of his spiritual products. Their level of strength was already sufficient to form a strong design spirit, so Ves did not have to rely on other sources to bolster this aspect.

Adding in spiritual energy taken from other sources merely served to add more complexity and targeted focus to his spiritual products.

"It's much like designing a mech." He chuckled. "The different materials that make up its composition are good in different aspects. A mech made of a single material won't perform as well as a mech made of multiple materials."

Equating the development of spiritual products to mech design represented an advancement in spiritual engineering. While Ves was still far away from

creating something as fantastic as the Grand Dynamo, he believed his latest methods brought him closer to reaching that height.

"Of course, for now I'm mostly relying on guesswork and unproven assumptions. If I want to prove my new methods, then I'll have to put them to the test!"

His next design project seemed as good as any to conduct this test.

"It's not like I have the time to hunt down a natural product under the circumstances. I have to work with what I have on hand."

Ves was under a lot of time pressure to design his upcoming spaceborn ballistic rifleman mech. The market conditions for this type of mech was very favorable right now, but the longer he took to complete his design, the more his competitors met the market demand.

If it took six months or more for him to complete his design, then at that time his competitors would have already captured most of the market! Trying to rob the turf claimed by others was a lot harder than taking over unclaimed territory!

He estimated that he had less than two months left if he wanted to stay ahead of the curve! Three months was his limit! If he took longer than this, then he'd be too late to attract attention away from existing mech models!

"Unless something literally falls on my lap, there's no way I can divert enough time to hunt down a strong natural fragment."

The only issue that really concerned Ves was that he needed to spend some time to locate and approach a suitable expert pilot.

He shrugged. "There's probably at least someone in the states along the way who matches my requirements."

In fact, he remembered that he stole a spiritual fragment from an expert pilot once before. Back when he designed the Aurora Titan, he still adopted the framework of the Triple Division technique.

These days, Ves considered the Triple Division technique to be overly rigid and outdated. At his current proficiency in spiritual engineering, he no longer needed to adopt its framework in a formulaic fashion.

Nonetheless, he still attempted to follow the formula when he designed the Aurora Titan. While Qilanxo's spiritual fragment played the starring role as the totem animal of his super-medium space knight, Ves relied on blending a spiritual fragment taken from a chivalrous expert pilot in the Mech Corps.

"If I recall, the expert pilot I've targeted is Venerable Rota Fountain of the 8th Spiral Shockers of the New Foundation Mech Army!"

Ves spent some time alongside the elite Spiral Shockers during the time he joined Senator Tovar's peace delegation. His close proximity to the Spiral Shockers allowed him to locate Venerable Fountain's spiritual presence easily and steal his spiritual fragment without much issue.

"I wonder what happened to him afterwards?"

His curiosity prompted him to head to the galactic net and try to search what had happened to Venerable Fountain over the years since he designed the Aurora Titan. Had the expert pilot regressed? Was he still the same? Or did he improve in some way?

"I've been avoiding this topic." He belatedly realized.

He had done his best to suppress the guilt he felt over stealing a portion of Venerable Fountain's strength.

With a heavy heart, he began to browse the articles related to Venerable Fountain and the Spiral Shockers.

"Hmm, there is not a lot of news."

Due to their status as an elite mech regiment, the Spiral Shockers guarded their information tightly. The Mech Corps largely kept their missions, their mech roster and other details under wraps.

If Ves wanted to gain access to classified information, then he needed to approach the Mech Corps. However, even if he was a Journeyman, he had no business in inquiring about the current state of one of their expert pilots!

"I think I have a solution for that, though." Ves smiled.

He activated his comm and browsed his list of contacts. Though he didn't really relish making contact with the person he had on his mind, his curiosity would continue to gnaw at his mind if he ignored the matter.

"Goddammit. What am I hesitating for? I'm making a big deal out of nothing! My relationship with them is different now that I've advanced to Journeyman!"

He decisively pressed the button to call his chosen contact.

A few seconds passed before the call went through. A projection of a very familiar face appeared in front of Ves.

"Mr. Larkinson. What an unexpected surprise!"

"Leland. Cut the crap. I need a favor."

The spy currently working at the headquarters of the LMC raised his eyebrow.

"What kind of favor?"

"I'm performing some research related to.. updating my Aurora Titan design. In order to help me understand space knights, I'd like to study from examples. I don't know if you know this, but Professor Ventag once did a similar favor to me by giving me access to a redacted record of one of the expert pilots serving in the Mech Corps. I... I'd like to obtain those records again."

Leland immediately frowned. "Your request is very brave. It's also inappropriate considering you've contacted me directly on an unsecure channel."

"Oh, I'm sure you've already made some precautions." Ves idly waved his hand, not very concerned about what he said. "Look. I really need you to fulfill my request. C'mon. Aren't we buddies? I don't see any harm in allowing me to get a glimpse!"

#### **Chapter 1496 Switcheroo**

If Ves was still an insignificant Apprentice, Leland would have hung up immediately.

It was different now. Not only did he become a Journeyman, but he also gained a lot of prominence recently! His recent achievements and mech designs proved that he had a lot of promise.

If Ves understood anything about Flashlight, it was that it was willing to break any rule in order to advance its interests!

He currently shared a complicated relationship with the military intelligence agency of the Bright Republic. He already performed some missions for Flashlight, and even became one of their external associates.

On top of that, Flashlight also became the third-largest shareholder of the Living Mech Corporation. One of their shell companies took over the shares from a shell company answering to the Ministry of Economic Development.

Overall, Ves was pleased with this change. As a shareholder, Flashlight never imposed any imperious demands on the running of the LMC.

Even when the company fell into a crisis due to the change in market circumstances due to the sandman invasion, they hadn't disagreed with the measures that Ves suggested to temporarily prop up the company's earnings.

Since Ves had interacted with them long enough to study their mindset, he knew how much they valued him. As a Journeyman with good growth prospects and decent ties to their organization, Flashlight probably considered him to be an important investment!

For this reason, Ves believed he could take some liberties and throw around his weight a little. In any case, the favor he requested might be problematic for some people, but not to him.

The only issue was the transmission method. Flashlight abhorred sending information over through the galactic net.

"While we are willing to extend this favor to you, you'll have to return to the Bright Republic if you want access to the information." Leland calmly replied after he considered the request. "It's not that we're refusing you, but the galactic net is simply too insecure to transmit information of this nature."

"Don't you have encryption or something that can mitigate this problem?"

"We do. However, they're only used to transmit the most essential intel because they'll be cracked soon enough."

Ves palmed his face. This took way too long!

"Forget about it then. Can you at least tell me how Venerable Fontain is doing? Has he changed since the end of the war?"

"Every expert pilot changes. Especially after a significant event such as a war. I can't tell you more than that, Ves."

"Has he grown stronger, at least?"

Leland frowned deeper. "Why are you asking this? What use does this information have for you? While mech designers sometimes inquire after expert pilots, it's mostly because they are tasked with designing or maintaining their expert mechs."



"I'm thinking about getting into the expert mech business myself." Ves spontaneously came up with an excuse. "You know that my cousin Jannzi is an expert candidate who currently pilots one of my Aurora Titans. I want to prepare for the time when I'm commissioned to design her expert mech once she becomes a full-fledged expert pilot. Studying the circumstances of comparable expert pilots helps a lot."

Leland remained suspicious of Ves. The timing of this request was very strange, but then again a lot of mech designers were weird. Ves had already shown that he was not exactly the most rational mech designer in the Bright Republic.

"Let's discuss this matter further once you return to the Bright Republic. For now, all you need to know is that Venerable Fontain has entered a slump for some time, but is doing well these days."

"How well, exactly?"

"Well, it's no secret in the Mech Corps that he has requested a new expert mech. While expert pilots periodically request new expert mechs, the Mech Corps mostly prefer to keep their existing ones because developing one from scratch is incredibly expensive."

Leland didn't need to tell Ves anything more. After Ves said goodbye to the intelligence operative and ended the call, he parsed the information that Leland revealed.

Expert mechs were vital to expert pilots. The machines had to be precisely tailored to their expert pilots in order to bring out the most of their combination.

However, Leland was correct that expert pilots often changed over the course of their careers. Most of the time, this wasn't a big deal as the design teams in charge of developing the expert mech would often implement tweaks to accommodate the changes.

"The only reason for an expert pilot to request a new mech is if their expert mech has become too outdated or no longer matches their capabilities."

Ves didn't believe the former was the case. The Mech Corps or the Senior Designers in charge of the expert mech would make this determination themselves.

If Ves assumed the latter was the case, then Venerable Fountain had either grown stronger or weaker.

Leland's description about this was rather vague. The spy only briefly mentioned that Venerable Fountain had entered a slump. This meant that the expert pilot definitely suffered from a moment of weakness for a time!

Ves bet that he had been directly responsible for this turn of events. He was relieved to hear that Venerable Fountain was doing well again.

From the context of the conversation, Ves believed that Leland meant that Venerable Fountain had not only recovered, but grown stronger.

"Strong enough to think that minor upgrades won't be able to accommodate his current capabilities anymore!"

Ves therefore concluded that despite being robbed of a spiritual fragment, Venerable Fountain was doing better than ever!

He did not have to worry about ruining an expert pilot's career if he happened to borrow a spiritual fragment from them. Just like Nyxie, they healed the damage and probably became whole again, though they had probably been set back for some time.

"It's only been two years since I've published the Aurora Titan. It's been even longer since I first started to work on its design." Ves furrowed his brows.

"This is a very short time for an expert pilot to improve all of a sudden."

If Venerable Fontain incurred serious damage and required many months or years to recover, then he would probably be content with his current expert mech.

Even if he grew weaker for a time, that was not necessarily a reason to request a new mech. After all, if Venerable Fontain recovered again, then his personal expert mech would fit him like a glove again.

No. The only reason for Venerable Fontain to request a new expert mech was because he had rapidly outgrown his current one in these last few years!

A very bold assumption came to his mind. It was so bold in fact that Ves did not dare to take it for granted yet. Despite how well it explained Venerable Fontain's circumstances, the implications were incredibly significant!

This was because he believed that Venerable Fontain, and by extension any spiritual entity related to his design spirits, grew stronger through the use of his mechs!

While this wasn't the first time Ves entertained this idea, he never obtained proof. Not enough time had passed for him to determine whether his design spirits definitely benefited and grew stronger due to establishing connections to numerous mech pilots!

"In theory, it makes sense, though!"

Ves always believed the man-machine connection benefited both the mech and mech pilot. In most cases, the mech pilot probably didn't strengthen much over time due to their singular connection to their mechs.

On the other hand, his design spirits watched a lot of mechs! While they probably didn't derive a lot of benefits from just one connection, what if they maintained a hundred connections? A thousand connections?

Maybe he should check in on the status of his current design spirits.

"Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof." He uttered.

Ves dredged up the details of his old mech designs from his mind and tried his best to establish a connection to the design spirits that currently resided in his mech designs.

He first checked the Blackbeak.

As one of his earliest original works, the Blackbeak did not possess a strong X-Factor by his standards. Its design spirit, the Black Phoenix, was purely based on the images he constructed out of his imagination.

Once Ves gained a tentative connection to the Black Phoenix, he tried to gauge its spiritual strength level.

"It's actually different from what I've imagined!"

The System graded the Blackbeak's X-Factor as C++. This was very weak compared to his more recent mech designs. Yet now that he came in touch with the Black Phoenix, he sensed that it had definitely changed from before!

"It's much more mature!"

Not only that, it had also grown more solid and real! Ves loosely estimated that the X-Factor of his Blackbeak model had broken into the B-range!

Ves discarded his Blackbeak design from the forefront of his mind and tried to call up his Crystal Lord design. Its design spirit, the crystal builder's leader, had grown stronger as well!

"It's a little less drastic, though!"

He recalled that its X-Factor was originally graded as B-. Ves judged that the Crystal Leader's X-Factor hadn't broken into the A-grades, but it had definitely grown stronger than the Black Phoenix.

"B+, maybe."

The jump in strength was a bit less dramatic than that of the Black Phoenix. Both mechs sold roughly equally, so numbers didn't explain the disparity.

"It's probably because the Blackbeak started off on a weaker foot. It's much easier to strengthen its weaker foundation than to improve the sturdier foundation of the Crystal Lord."

Ves drew his attention towards the Aurora Titan next. As soon as he recalled its design in all of its glory, he inevitably made contact with Qilanxo's spiritual fragment.

He gained a huge shock as soon as he came into contact.

"Powerful!"

The aura and presence exuded by the Aurora Titan's design spirit vastly exceeded his previous interactions with it. It had grown so humongously powerful that Ves suspected that it could even serve as a worthy opponent to Nyxie!

Ves immediately grew pensive as he sensed the huge leap in strength. This isn't the kind of strength a mere fragment should possess!

His actions had not gone unnoticed. As soon as Ves observed Qilanxo's spiritual fragment, the fragment observed Ves as well.

A formless greeting emanated from the fragment. It was a friendly and familiar greeting.

"I missed you too. Have you been doing well?"

The fragment radiated pleasure.

"How are you faring in your current role? Have you grown stronger?"

The fragment sent out an affirmative pulse, giving Ves the impression that it was very pleased with its current circumstances.

As Ves continued to ask a couple more questions, he began to get the feeling that he was communicating with an entirely different entity from what he imagined.

This level of strength.. was no longer in the bounds of a mere spiritual fragment!

He finally decided to cut to the chase.

"Who am I talking to? Are you just a fragment, or are you Qilanxo herself?"

A silence ensued before the powerful entity replied with an affirmative.

The connection quickly ended as his conversation partner ended the connection.

"Qilanxo.. has taken over the role of its fragment?"

The proof was undeniable. The 'fragment' he expected to meet was so strong that it practically matched his memories of Qilanxo's spiritual strength level back on Aeon Corona VII! The two were so similar that Ves had no choice but to conclude that Qilanxo's primary spirituality had taken up the role of serving as the Aurora Titan's design spirit!

"What the hell?! When did she conduct this switcheroo?!"

What did it mean for Qilanxo's physical body now that her main spiritual consciousness no longer resided in her massive body?

Was she still even alive?!

Though the implications of these revelations were immense, Ves did not forget about the answers she provided.

The benefit of communicating with a friendly and powerful spiritual entity was that they were articulate and smart enough to answer his inquiries.

If Ves interpreted Qilanxo's answers correctly, then she confirmed his guess that design spirits derived benefits from the usage of the mechs she oversaw!

This was one of the results of a symbiotic relationship between a mech and a mech pilot! His design philosophy facilitated this outcome!

"I knew this would happen at some level, but it's more powerful than I've imagined!"

### **Chapter 1497 The Power of Symbiosis**

The implications of what he learned about his prior works astonished him. He always entertained the theory, but he never really put much stock into it because of how ludicrous it sounded.

How could his design spirits grow and become stronger by serving as the guardian spirits of his mechs? Was the symbiotic relationship between a mech model and all of the mech pilots using its copies that powerful?

"There has to be a limit, right? Right?"

What if there wasn't a limit? What if continued usage of his mechs kept feeding the design spirits of his mechs?

They grew stronger. And stronger. And stronger. Until they reached a point where their strength had reached an unimaginable height!

Ves scarcely dared to imagine the endpoint of this hypothetical evolution! It sounded blasphemous to consider the possibility that design spirits like Qilanxo would evolve to become an entity equivalent to a god pilot some day!

"God pilots are the pinnacle of the mech piloting profession!"

He never believed that gaining power was easy. Was it easy to reach this point? No! The fact that out of a veritable ocean of mech pilots, only a hundred known god pilots emerged throughout the entire galaxy proved that reaching their height was not as simple as accumulating power!

"Even so, accumulating power is definitely one of the prerequisites of reaching their height!"

Ves suspected that this might be one of the reasons why the crystal builder leader inhabiting his Crystal Lord design had stalled in the upper ranges of B-grade X-Factor. Aside from requiring a higher accumulation of power to break past its threshold, it also needed to undergo a qualitative improvement of its very essence.

Another factor in his current theoretical framework was the foundation or 'talent' of the design spirit.

"Entities which used to be intelligent, sophisticated and alive are better off in this regard."

Ves did not have high hopes for the Black Phoenix. The design spirit for his Blackbeak mechs consisted entirely of an amalgamation of his own imagination. Its spiritual attributes mostly conformed to his own for that reason.

"Does this mean its existence is also an extension of my own?"

He didn't think so. When he observed the Black Phoenix, he had the feeling that it had already taken a life of its own. It was more apt to describe it as a proto-spiritual product!

Nonetheless, despite the gains it made, Ves never got the impression that it had grown more sophisticated. Its growth would definitely stagnate if Ves did not intervene.

"That's something for later." He decided. "Now is not the time to update the Blackbeak design."

As opposed to pale creations like the Black Phoenix, spiritual fragments and entities started off on a better foot. A complex and sophisticated spiritual entity



like Qilanxo who already lived a real life possessed the highest chance of reaching the mythical height of god pilots!

Even so, Ves imagined the amount of power accumulation required to become eligible to evolve to this point was immense.

How long would it take for Qilanxo to gather all of this power?

"Most mech pilots are really weak!"

Their spiritual strength was so faint that Ves had difficulty detecting them in the first place! The amount of strength they could contribute to a design spirit while piloting their mechs was so miniscule that it could be discounted entirely!

No, the only sources that mattered were mech pilots with spiritual potential or spiritually-strong mech pilots!

A million or even a billion regular mech pilots did not match the contribution of a single expert candidate! The disparity was simply too wide!

"Quantity matters to a certain extent, but quality matters more!"

Ves believed that expert pilots and higher might be able to grant unimaginable benefits to design spirits!

He couldn't help but think back on the grand design of Aeon Corona VII. The Sacred Gods accepted the worship of the Blessed People, but the huge and massive exobeasts only really cared about their Chosen, which played a role equivalent to mech pilots!

"It's a symbiotic relationship!" He recognized.

When one grew stronger, the other also grew stronger!

This was something that Sacred Gods like Qilanxo had been born to forment.

Qilanxo was ahead of the curve compared to his other design spirit. She actively spent some of her power in order to elevate Jannzi into an expert candidate. Once she advanced to expert pilot and higher, the dividends that Qilanxo earned from her connection with his cousin would pay off her initial investment in spades!

"This is genius!"

Certain researchers of the Five Scrolls Compact were way ahead in this field to be able to produce a fantastic genetic product like the Sacred Gods! Even if it requires exceedingly strange circumstances to produce them, the existence of all of the life on Aeon Corona VII proved that the Compact may have achieved a lot of progress in their attempts to create their own gods!

"What would they do if they saw me now? What if they find out the truth behind my design philosophy?"

Ves imagined that they would give him a thumbs up before cutting off his head in order to squeeze out all of the secrets locked within.

This was because he had inadvertently followed in the footsteps of some of the crazed researchers of the Compact! If not for his contentious relationship with this galaxy-spanning cult, he could have become one of its greatest researchers!

He vigorously shook his head! Even if he matched some of their inclinations, there was no way he would ever consider himself alike from those crazies!

"I'm a mech designer! Not a mad scientist!"

His profession anchored his identity. As a mech designer, everything he did related to mechs. If he started diverging from his desire to design better mechs, then that was a definite sign that he was going astray!

Thinking about mechs enabled him to pull himself back from the unrealistic delusions of grandeur sparked by his latest realizations.

Even if Qilanxo harbored ambitions to evolve to a higher state, the amount of power accumulation required would be immense!

Weaker design spirits grew faster than stronger design spirits due to the exponentially greater power accumulation required to reach the next threshold.

Qilanxo would have to partner up with trillions of regular mech pilots in order to experience measured growth at her level of strength!

That essentially meant that Ves had to sell trillions of Aurora Titans! At his level of fame, reputation and reach, that was simply impossible at this time!

"It's easier if my Aurora Titans are piloted by expert pilots or higher, though."

Quality mattered more than quantity. This was what Ves believed. If Qilanxo wanted to achieve measured improvements, then associating herself with expert pilots was the very minimum required for her to accumulate greater power.

Yet if she truly wanted to achieve significant improvement at her level of strength, then cultivating a strong mutually-beneficial relationship with an ace pilot was a must!

"This is the true power of symbiosis!"

Both sides of the symbiotic relationship grew stronger from each other! When one grew stronger, the other quickly caught up!

This interaction potentially led to a virtuous cycle where the improvements of a mech pilot spurred the improvements of a design spirit, which subsequently fed back to the mech pilot, and so on!

Of course, Ves did not expect a design spirit to extend its generosity in equal measure to all of the mech pilots it maintained a relationship with. For example, Qilanxo clearly favored Jannzi Larkinson over the thousands of other mech pilots of the Aurora Titan.

This was enough to transform the lives of some of his customers. In fact, if Ves gained the ability to influence his design spirits to select specific mech pilots as their 'Chosen', then he may be able to dictate who would become an expert candidate!

"This is an accidental side effect of my specialty!"

The power to point at someone and turn them into an expert candidate was an incredibly frightening ability! The MTA would go crazy if they ever got wind that Ves could unlock the potential to undergo apotheosis to any mech pilot!

Certainly, his 'superpower' to communicate spiritually with non-human lifeforms paled in comparison to giving mech pilots the opportunity to break the extraordinary threshold!

The notion of it was so monumental that Ves did not dare to breathe a word of it to anyone! Not even Nitaa should hold the knowledge that Ves could transform or revolutionize the entire mech community with his ability to provide ascension on demand!

"Of course, I haven't actually obtained proof that I can do this. I have to test all of my assumptions!"

His current design project was a good opportunity as ever. "I'm already testing a bunch of stuff. I might as well add a couple of more tests in the process."

With how urgently he wanted to progress, he couldn't afford to test all of his hypotheses one at a time. The sandman invasion especially placed a great amount of pressure on his shoulders.

For better or worse, his upcoming spaceborn rifleman mech design would make or break the LMC!

"As my final mech design of this mech generation, I want my upcoming mech design to be a harbinger of what is to come!"

Ves wanted to start off with a strong footing at the commencement of the next mech generation. He wanted to achieve a measurable jump in quality and value from his older designs such as the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord.

Through his next generation of mech designs, he wanted to announce that he had become strong enough to compete against the main players of the mech market!

At the very least, hardly any mech designer could match the unique benefits that only he could provide to his customers!

"Differentiation is key!" He emphasized. "Other mechs might hold the edge in firepower or mobility, but only my products are able to bring out the most in mech pilots!"

He finally returned to reality after he got caught up in a successive string of relationships. His mind state had improved substantially and he felt more stoked than ever to design his new mech!

He had been waiting to enter an inspired state! Now that he formed a bunch of new theories, he eagerly wished to test them all out!

"It's time to set a vision for my new mech design." He announced.

Lucky, who had been lounging on the desk while Ves got lost in his own thoughts, idly yawned and padded over to his lap.

"Meow."

Ves frowned. "Is it feeding time yet?"

"Meow meow."

"Nice try, buddy, but according to the clock your dinnertime is still at least two hours away!"

"Meow!"

As Ves playfully toyed with Lucky, someone suddenly requested entry into his stateroom. When the hatch slid open, Crindon entered with a concerned expression.

"We have a problem, sir."

"What is it?" Ves immediately turned serious.

If his security expert felt obligated to report to him in person, then this problem had to be incredibly serious!

"Let's lockdown this compartment first. The information I'm about to bring to you is very sensitive."

Ves activated the command that physically disconnected and isolated his stateroom from the rest of the ship. On top of these precautions, Crindon also activated a jammer.

Only then did they feel secure enough to talk freely with each other. Aside from Nitaa and Lucky, no one else would be listening in on their conversation!

"We have an informer aboard our ship."

"Who?"

"Gavin Neumann. Your executive assistant."

Ves briefly paused. His heart turned cold when he heard this name.

"Who is he reporting to?"

"Flashlight."

That was not as bad as he feared. His heart thawed a little when Crindon mentioned the intelligence agency.

At the very least, Gavin wasn't passing on information to his actual enemies, such as the Compact!

"How sure are you of this assertion?" Ves pressed his Kinner bondsman.

"I am ninety-five percent certain that Mr. Neumann is secretly transmitting information. I am eighty percent certain that the recipient of his transmissions is Flashlight."

Those percentages were high enough for Ves to accept Crindon's conclusion. He didn't find it hard to believe that his trusted assistant served two masters! Especially if the other master turned out to be a branch of the government!

Yet even if that made the truth more palatable, Ves still felt betrayed! It was as if a dagger had struck his heart!

#### **Chapter 1498 Serving Two Masters**

Michael Crindon explained how he came to the conclusion that Gavin secretly passed on information to Flashlight.

"Your principal assistant is constantly in contact with many different people." He began. "The responsibilities you've entrusted to him necessitates frequent contact with the management and stakeholders of your mech company."

"Benny acts as my gatekeeper and bridge to the LMC." Ves nodded. "If I spend my time on talking to Calsie and the other executives of the company, I'd be at it for several hours. As a mech designer, my time is too valuable to waste on routine meetings and reports. Letting my assistant attend all of the meetings and provide a summary of the most important developments to me in our daily briefings is a much more convenient arrangement."

Of course, it was only better if Ves delegated this responsibility to a trustworthy person!

Ves always knew that Gavin held an immense amount of power in his organizational structure. His extensive reach and his role as a gatekeeper placed him very close to the center of the web of the LMC's power structure!

Subsequently, this meant that Gavin not only had had access to a mountain of information, he frequently communicated with dozens of people a day! All of those transmissions and communication sessions made it easy to pass along clandestine messages to secret recipients!

"Ever since I became a part of your staff, Mr. Neumann hasn't shown any suspicious activity." Crindon calmly continued. "I've monitored his active communications in secret and I've never noticed anything that stands out. He has behaved impeccably proper and has never shown any sloppiness towards his handling of sensitive data."

"Then.. what is the problem?"

"Though Gavin has behaved completely honestly since my addition to your ranks, that is not necessarily the case in the past. During the Barracuda's overhaul, I've replaced her old databanks with different and hopefully more secure ones. I haven't thrown out the old databanks, though. Instead, I've been diverting most of my time combing over all of the logs."

Ves looked impressed at Crindon. "That sounds incredibly tedious. How can you even cope with such mind-numbing work?"

"Oh, I haven't read through all of the logs in person. I just input them into my security software, which subsequently marks out all of the suspicious and questionable activity it has detected. That still leaves me with a lot of logs that contain false positives. I've spent weeks going over thousands of logs, but my hard work hasn't been in vain. I've detected some suspicious data packages embedded inside routine transmissions that are heavily encrypted."

"How strong is this encryption?"



"Incredibly strong. It's beyond my means to break."

That caught his attention. "So it's not a mass-market encryption method, is that what you're trying to say?"

Crindon nodded. "Only government entities or extremely well-funded organizations use these kinds of encryption. It's very costly to encrypt a message and even costlier to decrypt them. This is because they are very hard to detect. The data packages are most often embedded in real-time projection calls. Imagine if a certain coordinate fluctuates slightly in color or brightness. This is in itself a very covert means of transmitting information. If I didn't watch out for these kinds of patterns, I would have never been able to ascertain that Gavin is transmitting covert information in this fashion!"

Ves possessed enough of a foundation in software engineering to know that there were countless ways to pass on secret messages through innocent transmissions. Comm calls exchanged an incredible amount of visual and auditory data between two parties. Any data points could easily be hijacked into a hidden vessel that surreptitiously transmitted messages to someone who tapped into the feeds.

There was no question that Flashlight had the capability to monitor all of the transmissions between the LMC and the Barracuda. In any case, all of the routine business meetings conducted over the galactic net were hardly important enough to sink the LMC if the details fell into the wrong hands.

What Ves found more egregious was the possibility that Gavin transmitted more sensitive information to Flashlight!

In the following minutes, Crindon elaborated on why he believed that Gavin was sending secret messages to an unknown recipient.

Some of the more technical details related to cryptography escaped Ves, but he understood enough that Crindon's evidence painted a solid picture.

There was a huge issue with Gavin's past communication sessions! That they ended as soon as Ves bought out Crindon and added him to the staff made it clear that the secret transmissions were deliberate and not something accidental!

"Benny might not necessarily be responsible." Ves suggested.

"I'm very certain he is responsible. He has shown suspicious activities."

Crindon projected some archival footage which looked as if Gavin was finicking with something in his pocket while he sat on the toilet. It only lasted for a few seconds before Gavin was about to use the toilet normally.

Ves immediately adopted a strange expression. It turned out that he wasn't the only one up to something suspicious while sitting on the toilet!

"Okay, you've convinced me." He quickly waved his hand. "You don't need to show me anymore footage of this nature!"

Crindon turned off the projection. "At first, your assistant acted very clumsily. That clip I've just showed you happened at the start of your ship's departure to Centerpoint. I believe that Flashlight only recently managed to turn Gavin over to their side. Having studied the subsequent footage, he has refined his methods over time. It's almost impossible to detect that he is acting suspiciously by the time your ship has reached the Kinner Tribe."

"How have you determined that Benny is reporting to Flashlight as opposed to another organization?"

"Through logical deduction and through recent proof. You recently called one of Flashlight intelligence operatives, correct?"

"Yes."

Ves had already briefed Nitaa and Crindon on some of his relations back home. It wouldn't do for them to be oblivious to Leland's true nature once they returned to the Bright Republic!

"Well, shortly after you completed the call, one of Gavin's ongoing transmissions suddenly tripped the alarms I have set in the Barracuda's communication systems. Given the timing of this incident, I believe that Flashlight has requested information from your assistant."

Ves bought the story. The request he posed to Leland a couple of hours ago must have confused the Flashlight agent to no end. Since Leland himself couldn't really figure out why Ves was interested in Venerable Fontain, then asking Gavin for clarification made a lot of sense!

There was still something questionable about the timing. "Benny stopped transmitting information since you joined my staff, right? Why did Flashlight act so carelessly in using the same suspicious transmission method?"

The security expert pursed his lips. "I reckon that they don't know or think the chances of getting caught is too low. If I did not comb through all of the past records, I would have never set the alarms that were on the lookout for suspicious patterns in Gavin's communication sessions. In addition, Gavin may be aware of what presence signifies, but Flashlight may not have been brought up to speed yet. Your assistant did halt in transmitting any covert messages immediately after I came aboard."

In other words, due to the information asymmetry between the informer and the recipient organization, the latter hadn't been on guard!

"Do you have any idea at all what intel Benny passed on to Flashlight?"

"That would require me to crack the code. I'll be honest with you. Even if I have access to all of the processors and advanced computing equipment of

Rawlings University, it will still take me a decade to decipher the secret messages!"

Government-funded intelligence agencies did not make use of simple commercial encryption methods. What they valued the most was making it as difficult as possible to crack their encryption through brute-force methods!

"Okay, I guess deciphering the messages isn't possible."

"The most expedient way to find out the truth is to confront and interrogate the subject in question."

Ves looked calmly at Crindon. "We are not going to do that to Benny. What he has done isn't necessarily illegal in the eyes of the Bright Republic. At the very least, I find it hard to imagine that he can say no to Flashlight if they secretly approached him and requested him to act as their informer in my staff."

Though Gavin's behavior still constituted a betrayal in his eyes, Ves really didn't blame him for doing so. Ves learned first-hand that Flashlight was incredibly ruthless. They were also effective in what they did. A normal Brighter like Gavin stood no chance against the most cunning spies of the Bright Republic!

Considering Flashlight's objectives and areas of interest, there was no doubt that they wanted to keep a closer eye on Ves. Sending Leland to the LMC was one means to keep tabs on their erstwhile external partner.

Ves had constantly put up his guard against Leland since the latter joined his staff as Flashlight's liaison.

Now, he realized that Leland essentially acted as a decoy! Ves could stare at Leland all he wanted, but the true informer in his inner circle turned out to come from an entirely different direction!

He smacked his palm against his face. "Goddammit! I underestimated Flashlight! Just because they have remained low-key lately doesn't mean they've gone on a holiday. They're still up to no good!"

"Mr. Larkinson, any state is wary of their prominent citizens. A Journeyman such as you who is on the rise merits careful watching. If not Gavin, then someone else. In fact, it's very much possible that Flashlight has converted several members of your staff into informers. I will have to devote a lot of time to monitoring their activities in order to identify them. Even if you remove them from your company, there will always be someone else who has agreed to spy on you on behalf of your state."

In other words, this was an inescapable reality. The Bright Republic possessed too much interest in its prominent citizens to let them go about their lives without keeping an eye on them. Who knew if they would abuse their power over society one day?

Even if Ves forged a friendship with Flashlight, that didn't mean the latter would let down their guard towards him! In fact, it was a given that they would keep an even closer eye to their external partner!

That was just how spies operated!

"If Benny is tasked with passing on information to Flashlight, then the transmissions probably concern my personal life." Ves guessed.

He took a page from Crindon and resorted to logical deduction to determine the nature of the clandestine messages.

"That is what I think as well. If Flashlight wants to gather intelligence on the state of the LMC, then they can simply hack its databases or convert one of the managers or executives of your company."

Ves ruefully chuckled and began to stroke Lucky's back. "I don't care if they have access to the entire database of the LMC. My company is merely a

vehicle to earn money and spread my works to the galaxy. The true value of a mech company resides in the heads of their lead designers!"

Flashlight knew this as well. This was why they approached and turned his assistant into an informer in the first place.

Gavin's close and frequent proximity to Ves meant that hardly anyone else knew more about the boss of the LMC!

Throughout this meeting, Crindon had remained remarkably calm. Unlike Ves, he didn't share any close friendship with Gavin.

"What do you wish to do now that I've informed you of your assistant's second loyalties?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing." Ves repeated and let out a heavy sigh. "While I'm not pleased that Benny is serving two masters, it's not entirely wrong. I do value his input and my friendship with him. I don't want to spoil the chemistry we have just because he feels obligated to serve the Bright Republic in this capacity."

This solution did not entirely sit well with Crindon. "Sir, I highly suggest you reconsider. If you don't want to confront Mr. Neumann, then you can resort to more discrete methods of phasing him out of your life. You won't have to spoil anyone's feelings or clue Flashlight in that you are on to their actions. For example, you can promote him to a seemingly-important management function within your company."

Though this suggestion sounded viable, Ves really didn't feel like getting rid of Gavin at this time.

"I'll think about it." Ves said non committedly. "For now, let's act like we don't know that Benny is in touch with Flashlight. I don't think anything he's doing right now poses an acute threat to my interests."

"If that is what you wish. I will make sure to observe him closely. Without cluing him in, of course."

"Of course."

#### **Chapter 1499 Ownership Structure**

Ves lost the good mood he gained after making several important realizations related to his design philosophy. Just as he was getting pumped up on working on his design project, Crindon came and revealed his bombshell.

After Ves dismissed his security expert from his stateroom, he fell into a moment of silence. Aside from stroking Lucky's back, he hardly did anything else.

Nitaa, who had been standing guard all this time, witnessed the entire meeting. She was no longer able to hold herself back.

"Sir.. from what it sounds like, you are in a difficult position with regards to the man you trust to manage your affairs. While I'm not entirely familiar with the organization known as Flashlight, you consider them to be a legitimate arm of the government, correct?"

"They're bastards, not to the detriment of our state. I've never gotten the idea that they have forgotten their original purpose and gone rogue. They are the hidden guardians of the Bright Republic."

"By extension, Gavin is also contributing to the state, correct?"

Ves shrugged. "Perhaps. If Crindon is correct in his allegations, then I agree that Gavin isn't doing anything wrong in the eyes of the Bright Republic."

"Then the problem is not as severe as it initially sounds. While it is true that it is problematic that a trusted person on your staff is holding double loyalties, his second loyalty is at least to an entity which isn't diametrically opposed to you. Is the Bright Republic corrupt?"

He had to think for a moment to formulate his answer. "It's not perfect. There are factions in play that are occasionally fishing for advantages, but compared to some of the states I've visited, it's pretty orderly. If the Bright Republic was corrupt, then it would have never lasted against the Vesia Kingdom. Spy agencies like Flashlight exist to root out officials who are willing to sell out their home state to the Vesians."

One of the reasons why the Bright Republic remained on par against the slightly larger and more powerful Vesians was due to the disparity in intelligence and covert operations.

Due to the fractured nature of the Kingdom, the Vesians never unified their intelligence operations across their entire state. This constantly put them on the backfoot against the Brighter intelligence agencies.

Seeing how effective agencies such as Searchlight and Flashlight fared against the Vesians, the government granted them more autonomy and power. They were elevated into one of the most vital pillars of the state in the event of an inevitable outbreak of war.

Though Ves discovered that the intelligence agencies weren't entirely devoid of bias, he did not consider them corrupt.

"Then what Gavin is doing is acceptable." Nitaa concluded. "It's not easy to stomach, but it is not something that you can prevent. Not with your current standing in society. If..."



Ves immediately waved his hand. "You know my stance on the matter. I'm not about to throw my weight around as a Holy Son. My situation is too precarious for me to expose this secret to a greater number of people."

"You're not going to tell your girlfriend, sir?"

"HELL NO!"

Nitaa blinked. "Okay, sir."

"Ahem. I apologize for raising my tone." Ves rubbed his eyes.

His emotions fluctuated a lot today. He hadn't even processed Gavin's double loyalties yet! How could he possibly think with a straight mind right now?

"I think the decision that you're currently inclined to take is the best." Nitaa continued. "A competent intelligence agency will just attempt to co opt Gavin's replacement if you decide to sideline him. If they are aware that you are suspicious towards your assistant, then they will simply turn someone else on your staff into their informer. The only way you can ensure absolute loyalty from your staff is if you replace them with Kinners."

Ves let out a deep sigh. "That's not really realistic. Replacing my entire staff with Kinners is not only expensive, but also a very clear sign that I am paranoid and have something to hide. Knowing Flashlight, those sneaky bastards will just take that as a challenge to spy on me harder."

Neither of them believed that they could ever get rid of this problem without overhauling the entire organizational structure of the LMC.

That was a bad idea for many reasons. As much as Ves considered the LMC to be 'his' company, he only owned 49 percent of its shares. Flashlight effectively controlled 21 percent of the company's shares through a holding company called Sibilant Asset Management.

In fact, if the agency wanted to, they could have simply decided to insert more of their people in the company openly. That was what they had already done with Leland, after all.

What rankled Ves the most about this awful situation was the duplicity and lack of trust. Ves had slowly started to warm up to Gavin.

Though he still withheld his most sensitive secrets from his assistant, he already started toying with the idea of bringing Gavin into his true inner circle.

Now, Ves was forced to discard this plan. Knowing that Gavin answered to someone else besides him meant that Ves could never reveal any of his sensitive secrets to him. Just the possibility that some of it might be passed on to Flashlight was too great!

"I can't take the risk!"

At this moment, Ves felt more alone than ever. One of the closest people he got along with turned out to be an informant who could never be fully trusted to carry his secrets.

Ordinary mech designers didn't have to worry too much about this problem. Their most valuable secrets mostly consisted of complex, abstruse theories and techniques related to their design philosophies.

Without adopting the same mindset as the mech designer in question, their trade secrets weren't very valuable in other people's hands.

Only the MTA could really make use of the information, but even then they much preferred to exchange the secrets for merits in an open and aboveboard fashion. With their wealth, power and influence, they had no need to resort to force or trickery to get what they wanted.

Ves did not have this luxury. His secrets were immensely greater than that of anyone else. While they granted him immense advantages in his career, they also weighed him down.

He needed to be a lot more careful about who he trusted from now on. At the very least, Ves became more determined than ever to diversify the LMC. Since most of its employees consisted of Brighters, organizations like Flashlight were spoiled for choice on who they wanted to turn into their informers!

He felt as if he lost a part of his innocence today. His distrust towards his own company and his own workers had increased.

Even if the ones responsible turned out to be a government-sanctioned intelligence agency, what if he wasn't so fortunate next time?

What if the Vesians managed to infiltrate his ranks?

What if the Five Scrolls Compact managed to turn his trusted men?

"Knowing is better than not knowing." Ves whispered to himself.

"Have you decided how to go forward, sir?"

Ves closed his eyes. "Yes. I'll stick to my earlier decision and act like there is nothing wrong. There's no benefit in kicking up a fuss. If I was in his place, I wouldn't have refused the request either. Gavin isn't the culprit here. The real problem is Flashlight."

Frankly, Ves didn't know how he should handle Flashlight. Despite earning their trust, they remained very suspicious about anyone due to their very nature.

He knew that they must have heard about his sudden decision to go on a grand expedition. Even if Gavin didn't pass on a message, Calsie or any of

the other executives at the headquarters of the LMC would have been able to leak the details to the spooks.

Perhaps Flashlight even learned of it as soon as Ves mentioned it over a comm call.

What Ves needed to do was sound out Flashlight's thoughts on his grand expedition. After all, for one of the Bright Republic's promising mech designers to go on a random, multi decade tour to an entirely different star cluster was very concerning!

Who knew if Ves remained committed to his home state?

What would happen if he decided to neglect the LMC in favor of another mech company?

Would Ves even want to return to the Bright Republic after he ended his grand expedition?

While Ves was technically free to do what he wanted as long as he didn't violate the Bright Republic's laws, Flashlight never really paid attention to the rules in the first place.

No, if Ves wanted to avoid any problems on their end, he needed to resolve the gulf between them in a different way.

He discussed his thoughts with Nitaa, who suggested a logical-sounding suggestion.

"You need to hitch them onto your wagon, sir. So far, this grand expedition is mostly centered around your interests. I can understand why Flashlight feels left out. What if you remedy this situation by obtaining their buy-in?"

"How would I be able to do that?"

"Ownership of an expeditionary fleet can be divided in shares." Nitaa said.

"Rather than owning shares in the expeditionary fleet in your personal

capacity, instead you should put it in the name of the LMC. Since Flashlight is a major shareholder of the LMC, that will in effect give them a small but substantial stake in the success of your grand expedition."

Ves grimaced upon hearing this suggestion. He originally planned to keep the LMC out of it and purely contribute to the expeditionary fleet with his own fortune. Involving the LMC meant that he would give a greater voice of how the expeditionary fleet was run to the other shareholders of the company.

That included not only Flashlight, but also the Larkinson Estate!

However, what mollified Ves a bit was that Flashlight and the Larkinson Estate would never be able to overrule Ves no matter what kind of votes they made.

This was because the LMC would never be able to become the majority shareholder of the upcoming expeditionary fleet.

"Gloriana will call the shots of the expeditionary fleet!" Ves revealed.

"Ownership of an expeditionary fleet is decided by how much money and assets people commit to the expedition. No matter how much ships, wealth and other assets I can contribute, I can never match Gloriana's financial might! Just the factory ship she promised is enough to buy out the LMC at least a hundred times!"

Of course, Ves hadn't actually fixed the ownership structure of the expeditionary fleet with Gloriana as of yet.

As long as it wasn't set in stone, he could always use his Devil Tongue to good use in order to convince Gloriana to adopt a fifty-fifty ownership structure between the both of them. That meant that Ves owned half of the expeditionary fleet despite not contributing as much to its formation!

Of course, even if Gloriana was gullible enough to fall for his manipulation, the Wodin Dynasty and the people backing her probably wouldn't agree. A factory ship built according to the standards of the Hexadric Hegemony was

immensely expensive. So much so that Gloriana already told him that it was impossible for her to finance the procurement of such a mighty vessel out of her own pocket!

This essentially meant that neither Ves nor Gloriana would be the ultimate owners of their expeditionary fleet. Instead, that honor was reserved to the investors that Gloriana managed to beg for money.

While this sounded as if Ves and Gloriana would both be at the mercy of the whims to faceless bankers, in truth it probably wouldn't come to that. If Gloriana managed to convince her Wodin Dynasty to invest in the expeditionary fleet, then she wouldn't have to answer to a stranger.

It all depended on how well Gloriana sucked up to the moneybags in their state. Ves was about to meet her in a month, so he would find out soon how much progress she made.

#### **Chapter 1500 Refugee Horde**

After he processed the unpleasantness surrounding his Gavin, Ves did his best to move on from what he learned.

His daily interactions with Gavin hadn't changed at all. While he guarded his words a little more carefully around him, he still leaned heavily on his gatekeeper's advice and suggestions.

The reason why Ves trusted Gavin to do his job faithfully was because Crindon constantly kept an eye on communications. If Gavin ever twisted his orders, acted on his own accord or performed anything detrimental, Ves would know.

As for trying to screw around with Flashlight, Ves instantly threw away this childish notion.

Just because they riddled the LMC with spies and informers didn't mean that they held any hostile intentions towards him. For now, the intelligence agency probably just wanted to keep an eye on his activities.

Ves smirked. "Let them look. Everything I really care about is beyond their reach."

With Nitaa and Crindon by his side, Ves could rely on at least two absolutely loyal pillars. Even so, he knew better than to rely on Kinners for everything.

Everytime he felt tempted to return to the Kinner Tribe to buy out hundreds of absolutely loyal staffers, he thought back on the other leaders he encountered over the course of his career.

People such as Senator Tovar, Major Verle and Commander Lydia all exuded authority in such a fashion that their subordinates unquestionably obeyed their commands. Ves looked upon them as role models as their force of leadership constantly inspired loyalty and obedience.

"What they each have in common is their emphasis on shared values and common identity."

He envied their leadership style and had tried to model himself after them, though he didn't have many opportunities to exercise his authority these days. Ves heavily preferred to delegate his non-mech design responsibilities to others, so he rarely issued orders directly to the thousands of people on the LMC's payroll.

"It doesn't matter though. The true secret behind authority is that it works best if people don't question it. They just need to be conditioned to obey."

This was the most important lesson he drew from observing the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens over a lengthy period of time. While they were probably not the best role models around, Ves truly admired how strongly they aligned with each other.

He tried to instill the same kind of camaraderie and brotherhood within the LMC and the Avatars of Myth as best as possible. Ever since he instituted reforms within the LMC to build up a strong corporate culture, he believed he could indoctrinate his employees into becoming unflinchingly loyal to him and his company.

Of course, building up a common identity could not be done in a single day. Ves looked forward to returning to the Bright Republic in order to see how the LMC had progressed on this end. Enough time had passed for his initial efforts to sink into the mentalities of every worker of the LMC.

This was why Ves didn't care too much about spies and troublemakers within his company. Not only were they unable to do any serious damage to his core interests, but there were enough people around who would guard against any mischief.

He wanted to make sure that the LMC did not make the same mistakes as the former Kadar-Neyvis Group. Due to the actions of a couple of saboteurs aligned with the Bentheim Liberation Movement within that company, the hard work of two successful Journeymen had gone up in smoke!

"Shenanigans like that won't fly in my company!"

This was why Ves also prioritized rigorous control, though he didn't go overboard on this end. He knew very well that every monitoring and security system was fallible and could be circumvented in many different ways.

To Ves, the best security system was to insure that there were plenty of loyal people in place. As long as they identified themselves with the LMC, they wouldn't allow anything bad to happen to the company!

"It's like a tribe!"



That was the best way for him to describe his aspiration. He wanted his workers to be so loyal to his company that they valued it more than the Bright Republic.

Perhaps secretly within his heart, Ves hoped that he could make Gavin care more about him than his other master. While Flashlight still needed to be appeased, Gavin could still choose to withhold more damaging information.

In any case, life went on and Gavin kept in touch with the company.

"The LMC has already licensed a ballistic rifleman mech design and started fabricating it en masse." He reported. "The quality of our copies is higher than most of the competition, so we aren't having trouble in selling them. It's just..."

"Our margins are low." Ves guessed.

"Right. The mech design we've licensed is a budget mech, so the money we can make is already limited. Add the licensing fees on top of all of our expenses, the profit we make is not as impressive as before."

"We're still above water, right?"

"Yes, but that's not necessarily good news. While we're earning just enough money to pay the bills, we don't have much left over to spend on upgrades, expansions and other activities that foster growth. We've had to stall a lot of plans, including the construction of a second manufacturing complex in the outskirts of Haston on Bentheim."

Ves paid a lot of attention to the latter.

Despite his reluctance towards expanding the LMC's footprint, they couldn't avoid the biggest nexus of mech production in the local area, especially if they wanted to start producing cheaper mechs. It simply made too much sense from a logistical and distribution standpoint.

"How much money does the LMC need to finish the manufacturing complex, Benny?"

"Even if we cut back on the planned production lines of the second complex, we still need at least twelve billion bright credits to cover the basics."

Ves winced. Though he could still cover this amount with his personal fortune, he wasn't stupid enough to reinvest his own money back into the company.

"For now, let's pause the construction." He ordered. "Since our sales of the Blackbeak, Crystal Lord and Aurora Titan models have cratered, we aren't short of production lines. Adding a dozen more production lines on top of what we have at the Mech Nursery is too excessive at the moment."

Gavin mentioned a recent development. "About that, the LMC recently received some orders from the government. We're about to utilize some of our available production lines on military commissions."

That was new. "What do they want?"

"The LMC and a lot of other mech companies with underutilized production capacity are being tasked with producing military hardware. I've already got in touch with a couple of other mech companies and they've all been ordered to produce the same kinds of war materiel. Specifically, we are being forced to produce lots of parts for turrets, tanks, aircraft and spacecraft!"

Ves widened his eyes. "That means the Bright Republic is planning to mobilize civilians! All of those turrets and vehicles aren't related to mechs, so the military won't be restricted in how many people they can hire!"

One of the biggest bottlenecks to expanding a mech military was that they could only field as many mechs as they had mech pilots. That wasn't the case with auxiliary regiments.

From the hardware that Gavin listed out, Ves immediately understood the government's intention. The Bright Republic wasn't intending to stake its existence on the Mech Corps alone. They wanted to bring as much firepower they could bear in the span of a couple of months!

While the newly-raised auxiliary regiments would probably be badly trained and completely inadequate when deployed against mechs, these detriments didn't apply to the sandmen.

Most sandmen fleets merely charged at their targets in a straight line without resorting to any clever maneuvering or stratagems. They mainly relied on brute force and overwhelming numbers to overrun a state!

The most convenient answer against such a strong but stupid threat was to put more bodies in the frontlines! It didn't have to be mechs, as most of the advantages they brought to the table were not very relevant against an opponent like the sandmen!

The main reason why auxiliary regiments fell out of favor in much of human space was that they weren't very effective against mechs. Static defenses would simply get bombarded from a distance while other vehicles crewed by norms couldn't match the responsiveness and flexibility of mechs.

In most cases, money spent on raising auxiliary regiments was better spent on raising mech regiments.

The circumstances were different now. The former turned out to be effective against their current alien threat while the previous war already exhausted the Mech Corps!

The new generation of mech pilots still needed to grow for the Mech Corps to expand their ranks.

Ves suddenly realized something important. If the Bright Republic wanted to mobilize its civilian population, then a draft was inevitable!

"Has the drafting already begun?"

Gavin nodded. "A lot of notices have been sent. Not a lot of Brighters are pleased, but most of them will grudgingly report to the nearest military base. Hardly anyone wants to run."

"Because we're Brighters."

"Because we're Brighters." Gavin echoed with determination. "We don't buckle from a threat. We endure. We defend. Standing up for the Bright Republic is baked into our blood. The Vesians haven't broken us, and we won't let a bunch of sand-like aliens break us like they did to the border states."

Both of them never thought about running. No one grew up in the Bright Republic wanting to abandon it when times got rough.

Doubtlessly, a small number of Brighters would probably pack their bags and flee to the inner regions of the Komodo Star Sector.

However, they would likely have to leave a good amount of their assets behind or sell them at a heavy discount. They might not be able to rebuild their lives in a foreign state, especially considering that they would be no different from the flood of refugees who mindlessly fled as far as their ships could reach!

"I heard that the Bright Republic is also settling a lot of refugees on Cloudy Curtain." Ves raised.

"Yeah." Gavin nodded. "A lot of refugee ships end up in port systems like the Bentheim System before breaking down or running out of energy. The government can't afford to relocate the refugees too far away or help send them on their way, because that would take too much valuable transportation capacity."

"So the bureaucrats just dump them at the nearest available mudballs, is that right?"

"Hey. If there is one thing Cloudy Curtain doesn't lack, it's space!" Gavin sarcastically responded. "Seriously though, the government wants to settle the refugees with as little hassle as possible. Rather than stuff them onto the overcrowded surface of Bentheim, a rural planet like Cloudy Curtain is perfect! There's lots of empty space for prefab settlements and the demand for agriculture has ballooned. All of those farms need workers, and it doesn't matter if they don't have any skills. Millions of refugees are pouring into Cloudy Curtain as we speak!"

Cloudy Curtain only boasted around 15 million inhabitants to begin with! When Gavin mentioned the amount of refugees that the government planned to settle on their home planet, Ves practically jumped out of his seat.

"Is the government crazy?! The foreigners will outnumber the locals! Dumping so many desperate people onto our quiet little planet will lead to chaos!"

Gavin shrugged. "Tell that to the bureaucrats, boss. All they see is a planet that is cheap to settle and with enough fertile land to feed countless people. As for the unrest that might ensue, they're already on top of it. Most of the refugees are going to be housed in isolated settlements erected overnight in very distant areas. Entry and exit to these settlements will be restricted by the fact that most vehicle traffic will be restricted to essential supply runs. If the refugees want to reach a city like Freslin, they'd have to walk hundreds or thousands of kilometers on land!"

"Sounds like a prison. A cheap prison." Ves curled his lips in distance.

"That's essentially the case. The Bright Republic can't afford to spare the manpower and resources to process the refugees properly. They just plan to set them aside in newly-founded farming settlements and deal with the

imminent crisis first. After all, everything they do might be moot if they haven't sufficiently prepared against the sandman threat."

All in all, the star sector-wide threat had forced not only the Bright Republic, but every other state in the firing line to adapt!

Ves knew that if the Bright Republic ever survived the coming chaos, then Cloudy Curtain would never be the same!

"A lot of those refugees probably lost everything." He whispered. "They don't have any homes to go back to. Cloudy Curtain will become their new home."