

Chapter 1511 Reverend Indra System

The fleet transitioned into the Reverend Indra System without any fanfare.

The Reverend Indra System was a port system, which meant it served as a nexus of trade and transit.

Not only that, but Reverend Indra also served as the capital of the Hertog Dominion! The rulers of the Dominion were always concerned about losing their grip on power, so they placed their seat of power directly in the economic center of their state!

There were upsides and downsides to such a decision. While the government exerted strong control over all of the trade taking place in the port system, the rulers also became exposed to many more influences.

In addition, due to the high amount of traffic in the system, it was extremely difficult to prevent threats from sneaking into the capital.

All of this didn't matter to Ves. Whether the Hertog Dominion concentrated all of their political and economic power in a single vulnerable and easily-navigable star system was their business.

Port systems were extremely easy to reach, and were always vulnerable against outside invasion.

This applied not only to human ships, but also to sandman vessels!

With a sandman invasion looming over the horizon, many people had become uncomfortably aware that the Reverend Indra would probably serve as a magnet to the sandmen fleets. The stories transmitted from the overwhelmed border states already proved that the sandmen disproportionately invaded port systems as if they followed the path of least resistance!

"That's the reason for the flood of outbound traffic in the star system." Captain Silvestra explained to Ves on the bridge. "Everyone who can book passage outward is frantically evacuating from this star system at this very moment!"

Ves frowned. "Won't there be anyone left by the time the sandmen arrive?"

Silvestra shook her head. "The exodus isn't as great as it looks, sir. Dominator Vivian II will never allow her own subjects to hollow out her most important star system. The ones who are booking passage outwards are mainly the foreigners and those who managed to afford the hefty bribes. Everyone else is forced to stay and keep the engines of the economy running."

"Well at least it appears the Dominator is serious about defending this star system. A lot of defenses are being erected."

The orbits of all the populated planets and moons began to look busy as countless workers and bots built hundreds of defensive platforms in space. Ves had no doubt that even more turrets and defensive works were being built on the surfaces of Reverend Indra III, the capital, and other planets.

Not only that, but many combat carriers and other military vessels had been summoned to the Reverend Indra System. They congregated together in powerful fleets and patrolled every direction of approach to Reverend Indra III.

"With the amount of assets gathered here, this star system might very well be able to bear the brunt of the sandman invasion." Ves stated with confidence.

"It's just... all those mech regiments and mech divisions used to be deployed to cover other star systems, right? It appears the Dominator prizes the Reverend Indra System above every other territory in her domain."

"The defenses of the outlying star systems will definitely be affected."

Ves couldn't say whether the Dominator made the right decision. Many other states underestimated the attraction of port systems to the sandmen. In the

end, once the defenses of a port system succumbed, the state lost a powerful economic and industrial center!

Having lost such an important pillar, the smaller and less important star systems all fell in quick succession.

"Well, we aren't Hertogers anyway, so it's not our business to pry in the decisions of the state."

The Barracuda escorted by the ships of the Battle Criers slowly approached the inner system. Ves agreed to rendez-vous with Gloriana in orbit of Reverend Indra III.

With a mixture of dread and anticipation, Ves watched the timer tick down. In a short period of time, he'd be meeting his 'girlfriend' once again. This time, he wouldn't be able to run if he wanted to! Gloriana already told him that she came with her own ship!

Time slowly passed as his fleet followed its assigned route and navigated through the immense amount of traffic.

Before he met with Gloriana, Ves decided to contact the leader of his hired mercenaries.

"Commander Cinnabar."

"Mr. Larkinson." The bearded man nodded over the comm.

"Have you thought about my proposal once more?"

"We did. Our answer is the same as before. We're willing to stick around, but not all of us are committed to signing up with you for life. We haven't shared enough experiences yet. Aside from a single battle, we hardly know whether you can keep your cool during a crisis."

Ves crossed his arms. "It's been many months, commander. Let me be frank. While I'm satisfied with your service, you're a lot more useful to me if I can rely

on you as much as Nitaa and Crindon. As long as I'm not sure whether you and your men will stick around, you're not as valuable to me. Once I return home, my Avatars of Myth can cover most of my protection needs."

"What does that mean?"

"If your Battle Criers still haven't made up their minds by the time we reach the Bright Republic, I have no choice but to dismiss you once you complete your mission. My money is best spent on expanding my Avatars of Myth than hiring you on for another year-long mission."

Though Ves understood why he hadn't earned the approval of the Battle Criers yet, he no longer wanted to wait. He effectively issued an ultimatum to Commander Cinnabar. Either they decided to get in bed permanently with Ves, or choose to part ways immediately after their current contract ran its course.

Whatever the case, Ves no longer had to contend with the uncertainty of whether he would be able to gain an ultra-loyal Kinner mercenary corps.

The commander knew what was at stake. "I'll make sure to push the men into taking a stand. We'll conduct a vote within a week. You'll get your answer at that time."

"Let me remind you that while I am hoping that you will pledge your oaths to me, you are not as irreplaceable as you think. Now that I've earned more fame and prestige, I will doubtlessly receive a better reception the next time I visit Bloodstone. Perhaps I might even get my foot in the door with Commander Oryn Mair of the Edge of Redemption!"

Ves truly felt so, and Commander Cinnabar appeared to accept his words as well.

If Ves really wanted to, he could buy out a better and more renowned Kinner mercenary corps! By then, it would be too late for the Battle Criers to enter into the orbit of a young but promising Journeyman!

"I'll work extra hard to persuade my men that it's difficult to find an employer that is better and more generous than you. For what it's worth, sir, I think we can do great things in your service. Nitaa and Crindon have both been raining praises about you in our chats."

"I promise you that I won't neglect you if you make the right decision. You already know what kind of mechs I design. Think of how much you can do if your mech pilots are assigned to my best mechs."

They discussed some other matters after that. Ves also took the time to ask about the status of the Ingar siblings.

"They're shaping up well under our care, sir." Cinnabar smiled. "Imon is still a brat, but he stopped pointing his nose in the air when he's in our company. He's also a damned good mech pilot. Casella on the other hand has eagerly learned how to run an outfit from me. While I can't say she's a capable leader, she's definitely officer material."

"Are the Ingvars ready to renew their contracts with me?"

"Well, Imon is a bit despondent about the lack of action. I think Casella is more inclined to continue to work with you, but she won't abandon her brother if he wants to leave."

Ves briefly frowned. "I see. Why don't you tell the Ingvars that if they continue to work for me, I'll give them the opportunity to fight the sandmen alongside my Avatars of Myth. I'll even allow them to apply for the Avatars if they so desire."

"That.. I'm not sure whether the Ingavs are eager to fight the sandmen. To Imon, it's not as exciting as fighting other mechs."

"Fighting the sandmen is our duty." Ves stated with conviction. "As humans, we are obligated to defend our fellow humans from alien predation. I don't think it will do their records any good if they flee from the sandmen when they have the opportunity to contribute to the defense of human space."

"They can always sign up with another outfit or employer."

"They might, but will they be able to obtain conditions as good as mine?"

"...I'll see what I can do."

The call quickly ended after discussing their upcoming security arrangements on the remainder of the trip to the Bright Republic.

Ves leaned back on his chair and scratched his chin. His many preoccupations during the tour meant that he hadn't been able to devote much time to the former nobles.

He truly wished he spent a bit more time in persuading Imon and Casella that it was in their best interest to work for him. Of all the mech pilots that Ves encountered with spiritual potential, none exhibited spiritual attributes as unique as theirs!

"I hope they make the right choice. I'll only invest in them if they're committed."

Ves would never be able to command their permanent loyalty, but a long-term employment contract should be enough.

As for what might happen next, it depended on whether he could apply some of his more radical theories to develop an accelerated advancement path for mech pilots.

Time continued to pass as his fleet finally arrived in orbit of Reverend Indra III. The night side of the densely-populated planet lit up like a plane of stars from above.

Close to the Barracuda, a small but very distinctive fleet occupied an entire orbital band by itself!

Gloriana had reached the orbit of Reverend Indra III weeks ago!

Just like Ves, she traveled in a small but well-protected fleet.

As Ves studied the ships that made up her fleet, the difference in quality immediately became apparent.

Her flagship consisted of a frigate-class vessel that was larger and more powerful than his little corvette. Two powerful combat carriers and a fast transport ship orbited around the frigate.

Each of the three escort vessels bore the same heraldry and shared the same color scheme, signifying that they belonged to the Wodin Warriors, the powerful household troops of the Wodin Dynasty!

Gloriana had already informed him beforehand about their presence. They were the Glory Battalion of the Wodin Warriors, assigned to protect Gloriana at all costs!

The dedicated bodyguards and protectors only answered to Gloriana, her mother and the matriarch of the Wodin Dynasty. No one else had the right to order them around!

Though the Glory Battalion fielded the same number of mechs as the Battle Criers, the difference in quality was enormous!

"How luxurious! Every ship and mech of Gloriana's fleet is second-class!"

If the Battle Criers ever fought the Glory Battalion, the Kinnners would lose soundly! Not only was there a huge difference in the quality of their mechs, but the disparity in training also mattered!

Ves frankly became a bit concerned about their presence. There was no way he could exert control over them. While they ostensibly obeyed Gloriana's orders, they ultimately answered to the head of the Wodin Dynasty.

They probably took a dim view on him on account of his third-rater background. Journeyman or not, plenty of mech designers from the Hexadric Hegemony could match his current accomplishments!

"It's easy to earn her approval. It's a lot harder to earn the approval of her dynasty!"

If he seriously wished to pursue a relationship with Gloriana, then Ves had to make the Wodin Dynasty acknowledge him somehow.

Chapter 1512 Stellar Chaser

Ves immediately grew jealous as the shuttle brought him and some of his followers to Gloriana's personal starship.

Compared to the Barracuda, the Stellar Chaser appeared to be at least twice at large. Featuring decent armor and large thrusters, the ship could have been employed as a blockade runner!

When the shuttle entered the Stellar Chaser's small cargo and hangar bay, Ves noted that there was enough room to transport a couple of mechs if need be. That was a lot better than the cargo hold of his own vessel, which barely accommodated a single mech but nothing else.

He couldn't help but grow jealous. He'd feel a lot safer if he traveled aboard a powerful frigate-sized vessel like the Stellar Chaser. It offered a lot more protection and cargo capacity while retaining nearly the same amount of speed.

"Then again, it probably costs a fortune." Ves murmured.

He won the Barracuda at Leemar for free, so Ves felt a little better about his own dinky little ship. He only grumbled a bit because the relative sizes and

capabilities of their starships reflected the overall disparity between their backgrounds.

"This won't be the last time I make these comparisons."

Ves already resigned himself to acknowledging his inferiority in certain matters. However, he still maintained his confidence due to his confidence in his mech design ability.

In the area that mattered the most, Ves believed he had the grounds to surpass Gloriana!

"Are you exciting about meeting Clixie again, Lucky?" He asked his cat who was resting on his lap.

"Meow."

Ves patted his cat's head. "Don't be too conceited. Just because Clixie is organic doesn't mean she is less capable than you. Who knows what Rubarthan Sentinel Cats are capable of. We've already seen how Felixia's engineered cats can be dangerous. The Rubarthans are way ahead of House Laterna in cooking up dangerous cat species."

Lucky did not exhibit any concern. Just like Ves, he believed he was the best cat in the galaxy! Nothing could beat a gem cat!

As the shuttle entered the bay of the Stellar Chaser and settled down on the deck, Ves exited the hatch. Lucky and Nitaa followed suit.

Since this was their second physical meeting, Ves made sure to dress to impress. Feeling the need to puff himself up, he wore his full Pride of Dusk ensemble, though he left his decorative cat ears in his pocket.

His goal wasn't to make Gloriana laugh.

Instead, he wanted to sear an image of strength and masculinity in her mind!

He predicted that if he did not stand his ground right at the start, she'd walk all over him! Ves did not relish being treated as a typical male Hexer who perennially bowed their heads and acted servilely in the presence of alpha female Hexers!

He breathed deeply. Ves believed he was about to wage his most pivotal battle of his life!

Ves subtly tuned his overcoat, lowering its spiritual barrier and allowing Zeigra's spiritual fragment to radiate its hostile, prideful aura.

He did not ask for permission to come aboard as his boots stepped onto the metal deck. He imposed himself on Gloriana's ship as if he granted permission to himself!

A row of six armored guards greeted him from the other side of the bay. The guards stood straight but with their helmets folded, allowing him to see their determined and dutiful expressions.

Ves recognized their blue-and-gold color scheme and the six-sided diamond emblem depicted on their chests. The guards were part of the Glory Battalion. Each of them had been trained by the Wodin Warriors and selected to become a part of Gloriana's personal guard retinue.

How luxurious.

Two women stood ahead of her own guards. The more professionally-dressed woman looked smart and stood a half-step behind her employer. She held a data pad in her hand while watching Ves' arrival with a faintly surprised expression, though she did her best to stay neutral.

Ves quickly recognized her as Gloriana's Benny. He wondered whether she served two masters just like his own Benny. Maintaining double loyalties seemed to be a common affliction among Bennies.

He finally turned his attention to Gloriana herself. Just like Ves, she dressed up as well. She braided a part of her hair in a crown, leaving the rest to curl around her sculpted face. Due to her natural or engineered beauty, she only applied light makeup on herself.

As for her outfit, she looked as if she was going on a date or a wonderful day out. Her black, two-piece outfit showed off her smooth neck, her slim belly, and a pair of bare legs that made Ves beat faster.

He inwardly shook his head. This was not the time to get mesmerized! He needed to focus on his mission!

As Ves began to walk across the deck, he gradually raised the ferocious aura radiating from his overcoat. He manipulated plenty of people with his Pride of Dusk's spiritual component, and became very proficient at finetuning its aura to apply pressure on people.

As Zeigra's perpetually-angry aura washed over the guards standing behind Gloriana, they did a decent job at maintaining their professionalism. They shifted the grips on their weapons and became a little more vigilant.

As for Gloriana and her assistant, both of them showed different reactions. The pressure affected the assistant the most. She sweated a little and began to see Ves as a stalking tiger. The effect grew greater as Ves closed within spitting distance!

Yet as much as Ves derived satisfaction in intimidating Gloriana's assistant, he became dismayed at the reaction of his girlfriend herself.

Instead of sweating or shrinking back on herself, her back remained straight and her posture continued to radiate that special kind of self-assurance that only Hexer women possessed!

Even Clixie, who sat besides her feet, showed no sign of fear, despite sensing the aura of a hostile Crown Cat!

Not only that, but Gloriana even lit up in pleasure and excitement at his appearance! The closer Ves came forward, the happier she became!

It was as if the fearsome aura of an immensely dangerous creature didn't even come close to overcoming her overflowing adoration!

It became clear that her obsession for him was every bit as real as he feared. A chill went through his spine.

"Gloriana." He spoke, trying to put up a brave front.

"Ves. You look so dashing right now. It's even better than the projections in my archives." She gave him a loving smile. "Anyway, welcome aboard the Stellar Chaser. I have been waiting for you for almost a year. Now, you're finally in my grasp!"

She sprung forward and jumped into his body. Ves had already braced himself and easily managed to catch her due to his strength. Before he could ask what she was doing, her lips immediately met his own!

Though Ves was astonished, her attractive fragrance and her sensuously soft lips momentarily overcame his reticence! Gloriana's boundless enthusiasm infected him and caused him to hold her waist and kiss back!

"Ahem! Gloriana, please remember your mother's instruction!" Her assistant suddenly spoke in the same clipped accent adopted by every upper class Hexer.

Though Gloriana doubtlessly heard the warning, she heedlessly pressed on with her kiss, as if she wanted to compensate for all the times she missed him since their first meeting!

Ves didn't complain. The more he kissed her, the more he got into it! He held her body in a possessive embrace and tried to assert his dominance through their tongue sparring.

"AHEM!"

Gloriana finally drew back. She placed her hands on his arms, signalling for him to let go. He did so, reluctantly.

"Sorry, Ves. I can't help myself."

"You don't have to be sorry." He responded.

She gestured to her grumpy assistant. "This is Melody Raft, my secretary and helper."

The woman, older by Gloriana by a decade, glanced critically at her charge. "I am also here to make sure that the two of you respect each other's boundaries."

Gloriana winced a bit, not at Melody, but at her mother! She looked sheepishly at Ves. "I'm sorry. My mother isn't very pleased at our relationship. She doesn't want me to get too close to you without meeting you first."

"That's fine with me." Although a part of him strongly protested at his decision. "We should take it slow. Even if we're in a relationship, we barely spent any time together."

"Great! Come on, let's head inside! I recently rearranged the Stellar Chaser's lounge compartment! You'll love it, I'm sure!"

She grabbed his arm and dragged him to the exit hatch. Their cats and bodyguards silently followed after the pair.

While Lucky and Clixie showed plenty of curiosity towards each other as they padded after their owners.

"Meow."

"Miaow."

"Meow?"

"Miaow~."

Ves didn't pay attention to the antics of their cats. Instead, he frowned as Gloriana eagerly glomped his arm without showing any sign that she was affected by his outfit's aura!

Seeing that his Pride of Dusk hadn't played any role, he gradually restricted its aura until its effect faded into the background.

"That's a neat trick." She commented.

"You've noticed?" Ves responded sharply. "How come you aren't affected?"

She grinned at him while patting his forearm. "Oh, you silly handsome mech designer. I've studied your work extensively. Since I couldn't get close to you, I decided to get close to your mechs instead. I managed to buy the gold label editions of your Blackbeak, Crystal Lord and Aurora Titan models after approaching their previous owners. I would have offered to buy one of your Transcendent Messengers as well, but the Ylvainans haven't budged at all no matter what price I've offered!"

"Ylvainans can be stubborn when it comes to their faith." Ves gently warned her. "My Transcendent Messengers

"I realized that as well. Though it's a shame for me to miss one of your greatest works, I've spent a lot of time studying your mechs. I even slept in their cockpits, wishing that you were with me to show off your mechs in person. I've gotten used to the feelings they impart to me. They remind me of you. I can feel the love you put in your mechs."

This woman! Ves became astonished when he heard how much time she spent with his mechs! She spent so much time in their auras that they no longer affected her mood in any way!

"Those mechs are some of my earlier works. I hope you don't think that they are reflective of my current abilities."

"I know that, silly. My older works are rough as well. It's difficult to look back on our older mech designs and feel proud about them. However, it also makes me happy to see how much worse I was in the past. As long as I spot imperfections in my previous mech designs, it means my standards have raised!"

That was a remarkably positive outlook. Ves previously feared that Gloriana's perfectionist tendencies may have led to unhealthy attitudes towards imperfect works, but it appeared that she was not as simple as he thought.

"What do you think about my designs?"

"Sublime." She spoke as her eyes gazed upwards as if she was imagining them in front of her. "I can see how much you've improved with every new design. Still, your mechs share a lot in common. Even in your earliest mech designs, I can clearly sense the dedication and passion you put into your work. I've never encountered anything like it in other mech designs. How can you make your mechs so impactful and so full of feeling?"

"I.. it's complicated. It's a trade secret. We'll have to conduct an exchange."

"Oh. I see. Well, we can always get to know each other's abilities slowly once we collaborate on a mech design. I can't wait until we knock heads together in the same project!"

She radiated so much excitement at the possibility that her entire body vibrated!

While Ves shared some of her anticipation, he also feared that the reality may fall short of her expectations. What if combining their design philosophies failed to produce the synergies she hoped for? He could hardly expect her to maintain her enthusiasm if that was the case!

When Gloriana said she redecorated the lounge compartment of her ship, she wasn't kidding!

A cozy and expansive interior greeted them upon entry. The beige coating along with the warm-colored furniture made him feel as if he entered his old home's family room.

Various amenities such as high-quality projectors and a well-stocked bar occupied the compartment. Gloriana ignored them all in favor of dragging Ves to what clearly looked like a loveseat!

Despite the presence of larger sofas, Gloriana insisted on seating themselves on the cramped loveseat, thereby permanently pressing their warm bodies against each other.

"Hehehe." She grinned up at him while stroking the arm she had never let go. "I always dreamed about cuddling with you. Now, my dream has finally come true!"

Ves tried his best not to show how disturbed he felt. The eagerness she showed was just as bad as their first meeting back on Centerpoint! She hadn't changed at all!

As much as he wanted to put some distance between them, a part of him kind of liked her proximity. Her warm body and her alluring fragrance kept spinning his mind.

His attraction to her was very real. The more time he spent with her, the more he became enchanted by her beauty and surprisingly honest attitude towards him. He felt as if he could let down all of his masks and be frank with her without worrying about betrayal.

It took some effort to rein in his impulse to share his intimate secrets with her immediately. He didn't know her well enough yet. They still had months and years to learn about each other. He was in no hurry to rush their relationship.

"So.. you said your mother doesn't entirely approve of me, right? Is it okay for you to accompany me to the Bright Republic?"

"My mother doesn't control my life as closely as you think." She reassured him. "I'm not a direct descendant of the matriarchs of the Dynasty, so I am under much less pressure to marry into an established family or dynasty. That said, she can ask Matriarch Xiaphna, the current head of our dynasty, to hold our relationship if they believe it's not in my best interest. In the worst case, they might even present you to our Wodin Hexagram in order to be judged!"

Ves had already read up on the basic structure of the Wodin Dynasty. Answering to the Evern Matriarchal Dynasty, the Wodins controlled a single prosperous and densely populated star system as well as a small number of lesser ones.

Matriach Xiaphna was an old but vigorous woman. More than two centuries old, she was not the oldest matriarch of her dynasty.

Above her head, the so-called Wodin Hexagram consisting of six former matriarchs or elder stateswomen oversaw and advised the current matriarch. They were far older than Matriarch Xiaphna and no longer concerned themselves with the daily running of the Wodin Dynasty.

Nonetheless, no Wodin took their combined authority and wisdom lightly!

Ves shivered at the thought of standing before six old crones. There was no way Ves could get away with his usual antics in front of those shrewd and incredibly wise women!

"How much influence do you have, then?"

"Oh, I'm not a nobody. Ever since I advanced to Journeyman so early, my dynasty hopes that I can become a Senior or Master one day. As long as becoming a Master is still within reach, they don't dare to neglect me! They already invested a lot of resources in me to accelerate my advancement. I think you know just as well as I do how difficult it is to become a Journeyman at our age."

Ves curiously scanned her with his System vision for a second. He neglected to do so during their first meeting, which was a missed opportunity.

[Gloriana Wodin]

Intelligence: 2.4

Creativity: 1.2

Concentration: 1.5

What the hell?! Ves almost jumped out of the loveseat! Was the System blind?! Had it become defective all of a sudden?! How could his girlfriend be so much smarter than him?! His Intelligence only reached 2.1, and that was after he swallowed an incredibly precious Transcendence Pill!

"What's wrong, Ves?" She frowned as she observed his sudden change.

"I.. ehh.. I was just wondering how you managed to advance so fast. You'd have to be very smart to do so, right?"

She grinned proudly. "Uh huh! To be honest, this is the privilege of my birth. My genes are already superior upon conception. We Wodins employ our own geneticists and exobiologists who are continually managing our genetic progression. When I grew up, I never lacked for gene therapies. It wasn't until I started to study mech design that I became really smart!"

"What changed?"

"My mother is the Minister of Security of Scimitar II. She managed to procure a very good bioimplant for me. After a year of preparation and adjustment, our dynasty's best biotech specialists managed to perfectly integrate my bioimplant in my brain! The results speak for themselves."

Ves was speechless. He never expected that the reason the System evaluated her Intelligence so highly was due to a bioimplant!

He knew that bioimplants possessed the capability of boosting a person's mental prowess by leaps and bounds. Yet seeing how enormous an implant affected the cognitive functions of Gloriana made him realize that other mech designers couldn't be underestimated at all, especially if they possessed wealthy backgrounds!

"Your mother is.. very generous."

"Mhmm. I love her so much, even if she can be a little bit strict. I'm thankful for her strictness, though. I wouldn't have worked nearly as hard in my studies if she hadn't insisted for me to live up to our dynasty's expectations."

It sounded as if Gloriana's excess towards perfectionism originated from her mother.

"Have you ever buckled under your mother's demands?"

She shook her head. "Never! She never demands that I perform beyond what is possible. She also makes sure to give me the help I need to live up to her expectations. Arranging a bioimplant for me is just one of the ways in which she gave me the tools I needed to succeed."

Gloriana's circumstances were so different from that of Ves that he hardly understood her description of her upbringing.

The woman who sat next to him was different from a mech designer who grew up in a modest household.

Instead, she had been born into a prominent Hexer dynasty from one of the two most powerful states in the star sector!

"What does your implant do, exactly?"

"It's called the Erestal-015. It's a bioimplant developed by a famed biotech company in our state and specifically caters to mech designers. It combines many useful functions such as accelerating my thinking speed, recording or discarding a huge amount of data data, enhancing my mental processing power, shielding my mind from brainwashing attempts, neutralizing any poisons that affect my brains and so on. In short, it does a lot of things!"

Ves widened his eyes until they couldn't grow any larger. What was this perverse Erestal-015!? The implant came with such an extensive laundry list of functions that Ves could scarcely imagine how much room it took in her head!

"Such a bioimplant must be ludicrously expensive!"

She smiled modestly at him. "My Erestal-015 isn't as great as you think. It can do a lot, but its performance in a single aspect will never match the functions of a dedicated implant that specializes in only one function. Bioimplants also don't necessarily make you better in mech design. It just amplifies your existing strengths. I do have to admit that not every mech designer in the Hegemony possesses an implant as good as the Erestal-015."

That sounded a little bit reasonable, though Gloriana undoubtedly gained an extraordinary boost from her implant that supercharged her career progression!

Ves thought back on the old Archimedes Rubal implant he salvaged from the Starlight Megalodon. Though its only function was to expand someone's memory and data storage capabilities, any implant that was good enough to be used by the CFA had to be immensely powerful!

Even though several years had passed since he obtained the Archimedes Rubal, he never dared to implant it in his head. He didn't trust any biotech specialist to operate on his head and insert something foreign in his most vital organ!

Who knew if the Archimedes Rubal came with CFA backdoors, and who knew if the surgeons operating on his head couldn't resist tampering with his brains!

He eyed Gloriana warily. "I thought implant use isn't very widespread. How can you trust the developers of the Erestal-015 to refrain from adding backdoors to your bioimplant? How can you trust the surgeons to refrain from messing with your head?"

"Your concerns are very valid. We're not stupid, you know. Not only did my mother personally supervise the purchase of the Erestal-015 and the implanting operation in person, she also triple-checked every single step of the procedure with multiple biotech experts. She consulted both independent experts and the experts in retainer to our dynasty."

"And they are all able to judge that your insanely-complex implant is sound?"

"Perhaps you don't know this, but implant developers always make it easy for others to inspect their physical makeup and programming. It's the only way they can sell their products. Otherwise, my mother would have never given her approval for the operation."

"Your mother loves you very much."

"Hihi! Mothers are the best!" She suddenly pressed her palm over her lips.

"Oh, I'm sorry! You lost your mother when you were young, right? That was insensitive of me! I didn't mean to remind you of your loss!"

Ves gave her a brittle smile. "It's okay, Gloriana. My mother... is with me, if not in body, then in spirit. She never left me. Just like you, I don't know how I'd be able to become so successful if not for my mother."

"That's so wonderful! I too believe our ancestors are watching us! Did you already convert to hexism?"

"No!" Ves immediately wanted to puke. "Let's not talk about beliefs, shall we? I'm.. kind of allergic to that topic."

"Why not?" She whined. "I understand it can be a bit overwhelming to understand hexism. You foreigners always make weird faces when I introduce them to the wonders of our beliefs. I thought you were different, Ves. Aren't you the Bright Martyr?! Aren't you the fearless mech designer who believed in creating gods in the form of mechs?!"

"That.. eh.. you don't understand.. it's complicated.."

Gloriana glomped his arm even tighter and stared at him with an unnatural intensity in her gaze!

"You don't have to keep your design philosophy a secret from me." She whispered to him. "Part of the reason why I obtained your mechs and studied them was because I wanted to confirm the truth. After a lot of study, I believe that there is definitely something alive in your mechs! The newer the mech, the more powerful their vibe! Are they the prototypes of the gods you've mentioned to the MTA?"

Ves became aghast when she turned his old lies back to him. How extensively did she study his mechs to ascertain the existence of his design spirits?!

He tried to escape the situation. "As I've said before, let's not be so hasty in revealing our trade secrets to each other. Whatever you may believe about my mechs, they're still machines. My mechs aren't so different from other mechs. I just add something extra to them, that's all."

"Oh, you don't have to be modest. I'm sure you'll tell me your secrets soon enough, hihi! Isn't that what lovers do to each other?"

"Only if they trust each other."

Gloriana leaned over and pecked him on the cheek. "I'll be sure to earn your trust, then. Loving couples don't keep any secrets from each other, don't you agree?"

"I don't think it's that easy." Ves replied as his cheeks warmed up for some inexplicable reason.

Chapter 1514 Flexible Girlfriend

The combined fleets that belonged to Ves and Gloriana transitioned into FTL. Neither of the two wanted to stay in the congested, busy and increasingly more restrictive Reverend Indra System.

While Ves originally planned to visit the surface of Reverend Indra III, he changed his mind after seeing how the entire star system mobilized for war.

He decided to stay aboard Gloriana's Stellar Chaser, despite knowing that there was no escape during FTL travel.

While he felt a bit ambivalent about Gloriana's more unsettling traits, he also adored her other traits.

She was lovely, bright, attractive, friendly and not as domineering as he thought. She also smelled incredibly great!

After hours of chatting, they moved to a stately dining room where they enjoyed a lavish meal prepared by a human chef.

Lucky and Clixie dug into their bowls first.

While Clixie eagerly dug into chunks of high-quality exobeast meat, Gloriana had to draw out a handful of exotics from her ship's inventory.

Nonetheless, their quality far surpassed the cheap space rocks that Ves routinely fed his cat. Lucky ecstatically crunched the exquisite exotics with a blissful expression.

As far as the gem cat was concerned, Gloriana already earned his approval!

Ves was different. Although people say that the way to a man's heart was through their stomach, Dr. Jutland already turned his digestive system into an abomination!

He mechanically shoveled the fancy-looking food in his mouth. didn't even know the names of the dishes. As someone who didn't mind eating nutrient packs, his unsophisticated palate barely registered whether his food was sweet or salty!

"Don't you enjoy your food?" Gloriana asked on the other side of the small dining table.

"I'm not used to eating fancy food. I'm used to eating whatever meals the autochefs produce on my personal ship."

She tutted disapprovingly at Ves. "That garbage can barely be called food! I'll take care of your diet from now on. You're missing out on one of the great pleasures in life!"

"I can take care of my own food. You don't have to worry about what I eat."

"Whatever you say, Ves. I'll make sure you'll eat the best meals my chefs can provide!"

Ves wanted to palm his face. This was another instance where Gloriana insisted on taking control. He stopped arguing with her about this habit of hers because it was incredibly difficult to get her to budge. He needed to pick his battles.

In any case, it was just food. What was the harm in letting her provide for his meals?

He decided to change the topic.

"I know we agreed to travel together to the Bright Republic, but how long will you stay?"

"Are you so eager to get rid of me, Ves?" She briefly frowned.

"Ah, no! I don't want to deprive you from your existing business activities. Don't you run your own company back in the Hegemony?"

"I do." She nodded. "I started a small mech manufacturing company. My Flawless Mech Workshop isn't anything like your Living Mech Corporation. It's exclusively a vehicle for me to accept and complete commissions. In the time that you left at Centerpoint, my mother asked me to adapt a dozen different mechs to better fit their mech pilots. I spent a lot of time modifying so many mechs, but I'm all finished now."

"Won't you get in trouble if you aren't accepting any new business?"

"Nope! I want to spend as much time with you as possible, so I cleared my schedule and put my company on ice. Isn't that great? I get to remain beside you for years!"

He looked astonished at Gloriana, not knowing whether he should smile or quiver at the thought of an extended stay.

"Is that even okay? Won't your mother get worried or something?"

"Melody and the Glory Battalion are enough to keep me safe and in touch. Other than following a few rules, I'm basically free to do what I want! In fact, my mother encouraged me to accompany you to the Bright Republic."

What?!

"Didn't your mother disapprove of me? Why would she want you to go with me? Does she believe you'd get disenchanted by life in a third-rate state or something?"

"Nothing of the sort." She shook her head. "She just wants me out of the way for a while. The Hexadric Hegemony is not as quiet as it seems from the outside. My mother doesn't want me to get involved in any political disputes. In any case, I already did my duty when I modified the mechs of some of her favored mech pilots."

Ves scratched his head. "Is the Hegemony finally moving out to repel the sandman invasion?"

"No."

"..Really? What are you Hexers doing, then? Doesn't your mother realize that the sandmen are threatening the Bright Republic?!"

"We know." Her face turned serious. "Neither the Hexadric Hegemony nor the Friday Coalition are ignorant of what is taking place at the border to the frontier."

"Then why are you guys doing nothing to combat this threat?!"

"Because it's not worth it. Because we have better things to do. Because moving into action is costlier than doing nothing to us. If the sandmen ever reach our borders, we will not let a single grain of living sand through!"

This.. Ves heard these arguments before. Whenever someone asked a Fridayman or a Hexer why they were sitting on their thumbs, they always replied with the same callous answers that expressed no sympathy at all for the plight of the citizens trapped in the border states.

He just didn't expect Gloriana to parrot those opinions verbatim!



"Why?" He simply asked.

She glanced at him in the manner of a Hexer rather than his girlfriend.

"Because the states under threat hardly matters to us. I know it's not fair to say that to you, but it's the truth. We barely have a reason to care about the third-rate states."

Ves lowered his head. While he hated her words, a part of him knew it was true. From a military, economic and cultural perspective, the third-rate states hardly contribute anything to the development level of a star sector. The second-rate states were the most predominant pillars of human civilization in many star sectors!

"Do you agree with this sentiment towards third-rate states?"

"..I used to." She put down her cutlery. "Now, I'm not so sure. You have to understand that I never thought seriously about the situation of third-rate states. Only when I met you did I realize that even the poorest states can offer something of value. People like you are the diamonds in the rough that justify their existence! I  m very thankful for the Bright Republic for producing such a handsome and capable mech designer like you!"

Though Ves took some issue with her logic, at the very least she did not regard his state with disdain. He didn't know if he could take it if she continued to disparage the Bright Republic.

"So in short, your mother thinks that it's safer for you to accompany me to the Bright Republic, which happens to be in the path of the sandman invasion, then stay in the Hegemony?"

She chuckled, her voice ringing like a bell. "Hihihi! It does sound weird when you put it that way, right? I'm not concerned. If the sandmen come, I doubt they can defeat my Glory Battalion. If the situation takes a turn for the worse, they can always cover my escape. The same can't be said if I remain in my home state."

Ves scratched his head. There was much that Gloriana withheld from him, and he knew better than to ask. A state as huge, powerful and complex as the Hegemony surely had its own share of infighting. It was just a lot more difficult to hear news about it because the Hegemony highly prized putting up a united front towards foreigners.

"So.. the plan is to stay with me in the Bright Republic until the sandmen force you to flee?"

"That won't happen. the Bright Republic will never succumb to the sandmen!"

"Is that the conclusion of an analytical report conducted by the Hegemony towards my state?"

She shook her head. "I have faith in you. I have faith in your mechs. Aren't you working on a new mech designed to address this threat? It's so frustrating you've blocked the monitoring systems in your stateroom and lab of your ship! How can a girl like me admire her man at work when you heartlessly block my sight all the time?!"

"I am not a public performer." Ves responded mildly as he resumed filling up his stomach. "A man like me enjoys my privacy."

"I enjoy my privacy as well." She saucily grinned. "If not for Melody following my mother's orders, I would have dragged you over to my stateroom in order to enjoy our privacy behind closed doors."

"Ahem!" The aforementioned assistant glared disapprovingly at Ves from the side of the dining room.

Why was this female Benny glaring at him?! He didn't say anything offensive! It was all Gloriana!

"Look Gloriana, designing mechs is something deeply sacred to me. While I'm more than willing to work alongside other mech designers for collaborative

projects, if I'm working alone I won't feel comfortable if I'm being stared at by a peeping tom."

"Well, as your girlfriend, I have to make sure that you won't ever design a mech on your own again! Doesn't it sound dreary to coop yourself up in your lab to design a mech by your lonesome self? You have me now! I'll stay by your side and make sure you won't drive yourself crazy by staying away from me when you become preoccupied with designing your mechs!"

Ves would argue that remaining in Gloriana's presence would definitely drive him crazy at some point! Seeking solitude and isolation in mech design sounded exactly what he needed to regain some much-needed sanity!

Of course, Ves did not dare to voice this opinion of his. Instead, he directed a shaky smile at his enthusiastic girlfriend.

"I don't see how you can help. You exclusively design custom mechs, right?"

"That's true."

"Then it's best not to disturb me when I'm at work."

"Nope. I will work right alongside you every opportunity I have!"

"How is that possible?"

She smiled and tutted to him as if he was a confused little boy. "Ves, Ves, Ves, my restriction only applies to design projects where I'm the lead designer. If I call the shots, then I want everything to be as perfect as possible. However, you make the decisions, then all I can do is make suggestions and assist you in some of the less impactful design work. I can perform calculations for you. I can perform simulations for you. Even if you don't follow my suggestions, it's fine."

This.. Ves did not expect that Gloriana was actually capable of contributing to regular design projects!

His considerations completely changed! If Gloriana spoke the truth, then Ves may benefit hugely from involving a very smart and capable Journeyman as the contributing designer of all of his projects!

He struggled to understand her limitations.

"I thought that mass market mechs are completely incompatible to your design philosophy."

"That's true."

"Then won't it hurt if you force yourself to contribute to the design of a mech meant to be piloted by many mech pilots?"

"It's okay. I'm not as inflexible as you think. I've had to adjust my design philosophy many times in order to overcome the practical problems I've encountered over the course of my career. I've already contributed to the design of a couple of mechs meant for mass production. As I've said, you have to be in charge of your own projects."

"I see. I understand. I think."

Though Ves still had to see how well they worked together, he began to contemplate whether he should involve her in his current design project.

Even if his Desolate Soldier project had already reached the prototype stage, perhaps she might suggest something pivotal that he overlooked in his mech design!

Chapter 1515 Suspicious Boyfriend

After spending more time with Gloriana in a day than ever before, Ves retired to a guest room set aside for him on the Stellar Chaser. When Ves entered the compartment with Nitaa and Lucky, he immediately noticed that Gloriana added a few touches.

The luxurious room exuded a grand and palatial atmosphere with its white interior and its large, traditional bed. It made Ves feel as if he entered a luxury hotel suite. The only weirdness about the room was that it featured numerous images and projections related to Gloriana!

Gloriana designing a mech. Gloriana performing research on an exotic. Gloriana graduating from university. Gloriana playing happily with Clixie on Scimitar II. No matter where Ves directed his gaze, Gloriana was everywhere!

Acting upon a hunch, Ves looked upward, only to see a huge portrait of Gloriana staring straight down on him! Though the portrait looked incredibly artful and aesthetically-pleasing, Ves did not relish going to sleep with Gloriana's giant face staring down at him all the time!

Ves grimaced even deeper when he recalled that this was her ship. If she was obsessive enough to sprinkle the guest room with her images, then she definitely bugged every surface!

Maybe travelling aboard her ship hadn't been such a great idea after all.

"Alright, Nitaa. Let's sweep the room. Sorry Gloriana, but I still like my privacy. Don't blame me if I have to wreck your guest room."

Though Gloriana wasn't present in the room, he knew for certain that she was listening in. He didn't need to rely on his intuition to determine that he was being observed.

He activated his jammer while sending Nitaa and Lucky to sweep the guest room. While his bodyguard failed to detect anything with her armor's inbuilt sweeper, Lucky continually managed to detect and neutralize the tiny bugs buried under practically every surface!

Gloriana probably expected that he only had access to third or second-class anti-surveillance tech. Unfortunately for her, Lucky assimilated tons of CFA

tech, and while a bit outdated, was still more than capable enough to defeat her best spying tools!

Lucky didn't even need to break too much in order to disable the bugs. His body turned intangible and only briefly solidified a claw to destroy the tiny bugs without affecting any other systems.

"That's new." Ves observed with surprise.

"Meow!" Lucky proudly swished his tail.

Evidently, eating the P-stone had refined his spiritual abilities and improved his spirituality. Not only could Lucky maintain his intangible state for a longer period of time, he also gained more control over his power!

Ves frowned at Lucky while his cat continued to hunt down bugs as if he was chasing after mice.

"Should I eat a P-stone?"

He shook his head and rid himself of this ridiculous notion. Even if his digestive system had been modified by a crazy exiled exobiologist, he couldn't digest minerals like a gem cat.

He still glowered enviously at Lucky. The only way for him to grow his Spirituality at this time was by developing his design philosophy.

As for Lucky, it appeared that all he needed to do was to eat lots of spiritually-reactive exotics!

How unfair!

Of course, Ves didn't seriously believe that he was disadvantaged compared to his own cat. They just grew by different means. Whereas Lucky's growth depended on an ever-increasing amount of rare and expensive exotics, Ves could basically continue to advance all the way to Master while designing the cheapest mechs.

He decided to busy himself by deactivating all of the projectors and screens depicting Gloriana. The jamming device already disabled the bulk of them, but they would quickly return to normal once the interference ended. It was better for him to disable them before he turned crazy!

Some time passed until Lucky finally deactivated all of the bugs. Ves was worried if Gloriana or a crew member of the Stellar Chaser would knock on his door, but evidently it was no big deal to sabotage the monitoring system in his own room.

Ves sat on the surface of the bed and let down some of his guard. He still kept the jammer active, though.

"Alright, I think we can speak freely now. What are your thoughts, Nitaa?"

His bodyguard took a few seconds to compose her answer.

"I've kept my nose active ever since we stepped aboard this ship. No one carries a suspicious scent. As for my observations, I have not detected anything amiss. While I'm not confident enough to clear Gloriana, her assistant and her guards of suspicion, I see no cause for alarm."

"That's good to hear."

While Ves would have liked to trust Gloriana, he was still a paranoid person by nature. Until he ruled out that Gloriana was a spy for the Compact or one of the Big Two, he would refrain from sharing anything sensitive to her. The stakes were simply too high!

"Gloriana definitely has some ties to the MTA." He spoke. "It's fine if the relationship is shallow. If it turns out that she is spying on their behalf, then... we won't be an item anymore."

"It will be difficult to prove or disprove this possibility. Even if she's a spy, she won't leave any incriminating evidence within reach."

He smirked. "Within reach of normal people, perhaps. I doubt she knows what Lucky is capable of. Isn't that right, buddy?"

"Meow!"

"You know what to do."

Lucky pressed a paw against his collar, causing him to turn invisible. His disappearing form also phased through the deck as he became intangible.

With his phasing power and his Miniaturized Stealth Generator, he gained complete and undetected access to the Stellar Chaser for five minutes at a time!

While five minutes didn't sound like much, the Stellar Chaser wasn't a very large ship. As long as Lucky knew where to go, he could easily infiltrate any compartment and utilize his CFA hacking capabilities to steal lots of data!

The entire reason why Ves agreed to accept his girlfriend's invitation to stay aboard her ship was to access her systems! Before he was willing to progress their relationship any further, he needed to allay his suspicions!

Was he a bad boyfriend for going behind her back this way? Perhaps. He didn't care, though. After finding out about Gavin's double loyalties, he no longer took anyone's loyalty and sincerity for granted.

A bit more than five minutes later, Lucky phased through the bulkhead and reappeared in the guest room.

"Meow meow."

"Come here and let me take your data."

Lucky fell onto his lap while Ves drew out a high-capacity comm from his pocket. He connected it to Lucky and downloaded all of the raw data that his pet collected.

If the cat followed his instructions, then Ves obtained some of the contents of the Stellar Chaser's databanks as well as Gloriana's personal comm.

"Did you find anything special or incriminating in your brief search?"

"Meow."

"Nothing at all?"

"Meow meow."

Though Lucky only caught a brief glimpse of her stateroom and her possessions, she didn't hide anything too weird. Ves felt a bit relieved, but still resolved to send out Lucky multiple more times as soon as he was ready to go on another infiltration run.

Once his high capacity comm downloaded all of the data, he began to spend the entire night to browse its contents. Skipping a night of sleep wasn't a big deal to him, and he needed lots of time to skim over the mountains of data that Lucky managed to retrieve.

He first inspected the contents of her comm. Though she made sure to encrypt all of the data inside, Lucky already defeated it beforehand.

Lucky retrieved a lot of communication logs and mech design files.

He decided to skim over her communications first. She talked a lot to her mother, her father and some of her other relatives. Aside from that, she occasionally talked to someone in the MTA, her mentor and some of her industry contacts in the Hegemony.

Ves didn't dig in too deeply in her discussions. He only kept his eye out for anything that signalled that she had ulterior motives in trying to pursue a relationship with him. If she was truly a spy, then he needed to find out now before it was too late.

He failed to find anything incriminating. Instead, her communications mostly concerned mundane business and design activities. Her talks with her mother were very illuminating. He played out one clip.

"...but mother, I really do love him! It's not a passing fancy!..."

"...Mr. Larkinson is a fine young man, but he is beneath your notice. There are much more qualified boys waiting for you at home..."

"...I don't care about their backgrounds, their positions or their wealth! None of them understand mechs the way that Ves and I do! The two of us are destined to be together!..."

"...Be mindful of Operation K, Gloriana. The schedule is..."

Operation K?

Ves searched for this term among all of the data he collected. His comm returned with a few more scattered mentions.

He was worried that this so-called 'Operation K' referred to a deliberate spying or seduction attempt on him. Fortunately, after reading the context behind all of the mentions, he realized it had nothing to do with him. It instead referred to a major move within the Hegemony. The entire Wodin Dynasty was involved.

Though Ves tried his best to figure out more, Gloriana and her mother Constance had always been careful when mentioning it over their calls.

"Well, at least it doesn't have anything to do with me." He shrugged.

Ves noted that she occasionally talked with some old friends in the Hegemony. Their discussions yielded nothing useful as they only discussed shallow matters or exchanged gossip that only pertained to Hexer high society.

"Useless prattle."

Finding nothing incriminating in the communication logs, he diverted his attention to the documents and other files she stored on her comm. He glanced through her design schematics, finding each and everyone of them to be remarkable.

"I shouldn't peek too much at her work. It's better if she explains them to me in person."

Ves did not wish to spoil such moments, so he quickly dismissed them after he checked that her files did not carry any secret messages.

Aside from some irrelevant junk, Ves also stumbled across a large stash of footage and recordings... of him. His face immediately became grave as he counted an uncomfortably large amount of files.

"This crazy woman!"

He did not feel any desire to inspect this data any further!

He dismissed the contents of her comm and decided to dive in the Stellar Chaser's databanks. He checked the navigation logs and noted that the ship hadn't been traveling anywhere weird. He also dug into some other files and logs.

Ships stored and processed a lot of data. So much so that his high-capacity comm wouldn't be able to store all of it. Even if it did, Ves wouldn't be able to make sense of much of the data anyway.

Nonetheless, the sample that Lucky retrieved did not reveal anything interesting at all. Lucky copied all of the files that Ves instructed his cat to retrieve beforehand. He had an easier time studying the Stellar Chaser's communication logs, cargo manifests, passenger movement and other understandable documents.

None of them revealed anything incriminating.

Several hours passed before Ves finished skimming over all of the data. He breathed a little bit easier as he hadn't found a smoking gun that signified that Gloriana intended anything nefarious to him. All the files he accessed so far proved that she was really who she said she was, a prominent Hexer and a capable Journeyman Mech Designer.

Ves glanced at the time and knew that the local night was well underway.

"It's time."

Ves first wiped all of the files stored in the high-capacity comm before putting it away. He then changed his clothes before laying down on his bed.

Instead of falling to sleep, he concentrated his mind. A spiritual projection invisible to anyone but him started to emerge from his mind.

Accessing his girlfriend's files and communication logs didn't satisfy him. If he truly wanted to discover her true nature, then there was no better way than to access her mind directly!

Chapter 1516 Loving Embrace

Unless someone possessed his range of spiritual control, no one would be able to disguise their spiritual nature from him. Even Ves himself exposed his true nature most of the time if he did not don a spiritual mask.

Considering that Gloriana ought to be an orthodox mech designer, there was no way that she possessed the ability to disguise her spiritual nature.

Ves was very confident that his spiritual excursion tonight would lay bare the truth! The outcome of his spiritual investigation determined whether he could lay down his worst suspicions and pursue a relationship with Gloriana with confidence!

He directed his spiritual projection through a number of compartments. Just like the Barracuda, the accommodations aboard the Stellar Chaser were all situated on the same deck.

He didn't have to reach out very far until his projection reached Gloriana's stateroom.

Since his spiritual senses mainly observed spirituality, Ves encountered nothing around his target except for the extremely dim presence of her guards.

Gloriana's spirituality was like a beacon in the dark to his senses. The strength of her mind actually matched very closely to his own, which signified that they were in a similar stage in their progression.

"No. Not quite. Hers is a bit more refined!"

As Ves observed her spirituality further, he perceived a stronger sensation from it than his own. He speculated that the difference signified a disparity in the strength of their design philosophies!

"She achieved more progress than me! Damnit!"

It made sense, though. She advanced at least a year earlier than Ves. Despite not having access to anything like the System, her wealthy background and her amazing Erestal-015 cranial bioimplant adequately substituted some of its functions!

"I have to work harder!" He determined. "If I don't catch up, she'll definitely advance to Senior first!"

He had been a little bit too conceited in his own strength. Though the System provided him with numerous conveniences inaccessible to many people, it was far from the only means for mech designers to empower themselves!

Ves decided to leave this extraneous topic of later and continued conducting his observation. After staring at Gloriana's radiant spirituality for a time, he pretty much determined its most notable spiritual attributes.

Just like Ves, she possessed a mix of spiritual attributes. Ves instantly identified the ones related to mechs.

Surprisingly, her affinity for mechs was quite high. Though his own affinity was higher after he crafted a masterwork, Ves knew that her respectable affinity was doubtlessly one of the reasons for her rapid progression.

"Mech designers who reach Journeymen when they're still young are doubtlessly obsessed with mechs!"

If Ves followed this train of logic, then Oleg Vorn, Master Olson's youngest direct disciple, probably exhibited an even more frightening affinity for mechs!

As Ves studied Gloriana's spiritual attributes further, he also identified something strong but also related to mechs.

This was her design philosophy!

From an outside perspective, Ves perceived only a hint of her desire to design the perfect mech. He knew that most of her design philosophy was contained within her design seed. Situated in the center of her mind and protected by the strong barrier of her mind, Ves wasn't even sure he'd be able to observe it directly.

He began to observe the rest of her attributes. There was a lot he didn't recognize, but none of them particularly stood out to him. Her personality traits didn't appear to be very remarkable, but under the influence of her design philosophy, they pushed her into working harder.

She needed to be as perfect as possible! Her mechs had to be as perfect as possible!

Gloriana ingrained the pursuit of perfection very thoroughly in her mind. She hadn't been putting up an act at all, though Ves already determined this after glancing through her design schematics.

So far, everything he observed led him to believe that she had been honest with him. Yet what truly lurked within her mind? Ves did not feel reassured if he left at this point. He needed to gain a closer glimpse of her mind.

"Right now she should be asleep. If my projection approaches her mind, I'll only deal with her subconscious. I think."

Ves decided to take a risk and push his spiritual projection closer to her mind. He tried to sneak the extension of his Spirituality close without arousing Gloriana's largely-dormant mind.

He failed.

As soon as his spiritual projection entered a certain range, Gloriana's spirituality immediately roused a bit and honed in on his spiritual projection!

Though Ves was sure that it was just her unconscious reaction at work, he underestimated her sensitivity!

"How the hell did she manage to notice me so soon?!"

He held his projection still and carefully observed Gloriana's reactions. After uncannily managing to detect his sneaky projection, it did not put up its defenses or tried to repel him as he expected.

Instead, her spirituality bloomed with a sensation that Ves quickly recognized as happiness.

She was pleased to encounter Ves!

Ves mentally blinked. "Really?"

If Ves encountered an entity trying to intrude in his mind, he would lash out and defend his inner being with as much ferocity as possible! His mind was his palace and the essence of his identity! There was no way he would allow anyone to barge into his sanctum!

He wouldn't even allow Gloriana or his own mother to get close!

Yet the reaction exhibited by Gloriana's spirituality was so pronounced that Ves had a very hard time believing that she was less than sincere in welcoming his presence!

He wanted to scratch his head. Should he send his projection closer or not? A part of him believed that Gloriana was laying a trap. Another part of him became convinced that Gloriana did not mean any harm.

"It's very hard to deceive me on a spiritual level."

He decided to get closer. As his spiritual projection hovered closer, Gloriana's unconscious reactions grew stronger. Ves mainly sensed a wholehearted desire to embrace him from her spirituality.

Ves found it very difficult that anyone would exhibit such an uncompromising reaction to another. Gloriana's adoration to him felt very genuine. Not only that, she appeared to be very familiar with his spiritual presence.

"Is it because she studied my mechs so much?"

From their earlier talks, Ves heard how extensively she studied his old designs. She even gave him a laundry list of points he needed to address and improve upon. The thoroughness of her understanding of his designs scared him quite a bit. She knew almost just as much as him as if she had been an active participant of his design projects from the start!

Since Ves left an undeniable trace of him in every mech he designed and built, it did not surprise him that much to realize that she identified his spiritual fingerprint.

"I'm here. Will you let me in, Gloriana?"

Her urge to embrace him was so strong that a small amount of spiritual energy leaked out from her mind. Though it moved a bit strangely and without

coherent direction, the could of spiritual energy continued to hone in on his spiritual projection.

Once they touched each other, Ves sensed a storm of undisguised emotions. Love. Welcome. Adoration. Comfort. Happiness. Perfection.

Ves couldn't help but let down his guard somewhat. He tried his best to convey his desire to enter her mind.

Gloriana's subconscious mind accepted instantly. A hole formed in her outer defenses before Ves could process her instant acceptance.

"It's that easy?" Ves felt a bit befuddled.

This entire spiritual excursion proceeded way beyond his expectations. Instead of looking at a gift horse in the mouth, Ves decided to accept her invitation and entered her mind without any further considerations.

His spiritual projection passed through the hole in her defenses without encountering any hindrance.

Ves took the opportunity to sweep his spiritual senses in the inner portion of her mind.

"Strong!"

Her mind was almost as large and expansive as his own. It was a bit less rigid and strong, though, which signified that her mind hadn't been subject to as much abuse as his own.

Nothing particularly strange resided in her mind. She did not possess anything fantastic like his Grand Dynamo either. Her mind probably resembled that of other Journeymen.

Ves didn't need to inspect the interior of her mind too thoroughly to determine her true nature. He did not send his spiritual projection further inwards but

instead focused his attention on the most prominent concentration of spirituality.

Her design seed.

"Beautiful." He mentally sighed.

Her crystallized spirituality that rested in the center of her mind was just as impressive and resplendent as her own. Though it radiated a different vibe, the blend of mechs and perfection intertwined with each other in a very intricate and harmonious way.

"So beautiful."

He compared her design seed to his own. Just as Gloriana managed to integrate mechs with perfection, Ves also succeeded in melding the mechs with life.

What would happen if mechs, life and perfection all merged together in the process of designing the perfect, living mech?

Ves scarcely came up with the notion before Gloriana's design seed pulsed with excitement! His intuition rang with alarm as he detected that something significant was about to happen!

"I have to get out of here!"

He pulled back his spiritual projection, only to bump against the solid barrier of her mind!

Her mind closed the exit!

"Lemme out!"

Because he planned to sneak up to Gloriana's spirituality rather than attack it, his projection did not possess a lot of strength. His spiritual projection completely failed to break out of her mind!

Her design seed continued to pulse in very strange ways that continually buzzed his intuition. Ves wanted nothing more than to retrieve his spiritual projection, but no matter how many times it banged against the barrier of her mind, he failed to make a single dent!

At a certain point, Gloriana's design seed released a strong spiritual pulse that coursed through her entire mind!

Ves quickly lost contact with his spiritual projection!

"Goddammit!"

This time, he cursed with his voice. He held his head in his palm in order to relieve the minor sting on his mind. Losing a small chunk of his spiritual energy was not a big deal, but the loss had been too abrupt!

He analyzed what took place while he recovered from his ordeal.

Gloriana's dormant mind and spirituality did not deceive him. Even if she possessed the ability to disguise herself like Ves, the interior of her mind completely conformed to her personality.

"She's not a spy and she isn't pretending to be in love with me. In fact, her wholehearted love for me is disturbingly strong!"

This was not normal behavior, but in the context of her personality and her spiritual attributes, Ves deeply understood that it was on par with her nature. As long as she identified something perfect or could assist her in reaching perfection, she would do everything to secure this advantage!

This compulsion also explained what happened at the end. The presence of a part of his spirituality in her mind turned out to be tantalizingly attractive to Gloriana's spirituality. Her design seed especially hungered after Ves, so much so that it took the initiative to capture his spiritual projection!

"I unwittingly entered a trap!"

Even if other mech designers did not possess his range of spiritual applications, they were anything but defenseless. Just like expert pilots, mech designers possessed their own form of defenses.

As the core of their power, their design seeds turned out to be exceptionally formidable! His weak spiritual projection stood no chance!

Ves wondered what kind of repercussions might ensue now that Gloriana captured a small portion of his spiritual energy.

"She won't be able to do much." He guessed.

Why did he feel so concerned, then?

According to his understanding of spirituality, no one could empower themselves by siphoning someone else's spiritual energy.

"Except mom."

That was an exception on account of her powers and their direct family ties. Gloriana ought to be the same as him. As long as their spiritual attribute mix was different, they wouldn't be able to feed off each other.

Even so, considering how Gloriana's mind turned out, her design seed might have captured his spirituality for reasons other than practical.

She just wanted to own him! Hoarding a portion of his spiritual energy completely conformed to her obsessive tendencies!

Chapter 1517 Showoff

The next morning, Ves dressed himself and wearily dragged himself to the dining room in order to eat breakfast.

He dispensed with his impressive-looking but cumbersome Pride of Dusk outfit. While he could still wear it to impress her subordinates, there was little point in doing so. Perhaps it was worthy for him to earn Melody's approval, but he needed to do so through his actions rather than his dress.

As for increasing Gloriana's attraction to him? That was completely unnecessary! His nightly discoveries already made that abundantly clear!

"Good morning, Ves!" Gloriana energetically scurried up to him and embraced him in a hug before dragging him to the dining table. "I just enjoyed the loveliest dream last night, hihi! I dreamt that Melody didn't forbid you from sleeping in the same room as me. We were cuddling together all night under the covers! We even did the thing that my mother has forbidden me from doing, hihi! You even entered my deepest part and even left a piece of you inside me! Oh, you scoundrel, you could have at least warned me, hihihi!"

The more she talked, the more Ves became aghast. What kind of crazy

"Ahem!" Melody interrupted her charge's lurid fantasy. "Please act with decorum, Miss Gloriana. It is highly inappropriate to bring up such matters in front of a man."

Gloriana looked grumpily at her assistant. "We're not in public. Why must you be such a prude? This is my ship! I can't do anything I want!"

"Regardless where you are, you are still a scion of the Wodin Dynasty.

As floating bots began to serve exquisite breakfast dishes to the two of them, Ves carefully observed his girlfriend. He barely paid attention to the coffee he sipped as he surreptitiously activated his spiritual vision.

He tried to find a trace of his spiritual projection trapped in her. Though it was difficult for him to sense anything past her strong and radiant spirituality, he still managed to sense a minute piece of him residing in the confines of her mind!

Ves believed its detachment from him turned it into something akin to a very weak spiritual fragment. Gloriana's spirituality hadn't attacked it or attempted to assimilate it. Instead, his fragment floated peacefully in its cage, as if she was more than content to keep it around!

To be honest, Ves felt this situation was very weird. He had no idea what the long-term influence of keeping his spiritual fragment might look like.

According to his current understanding of spirituality, some bleedover or familiarization might occur between the two. The more the spiritual entities remained in proximity, the more they became accustomed to each other.

Now that he came close to Gloriana, Ves felt that he could reassert some control over his spiritual fragment. While he probably couldn't do anything sophisticated due to the hindrance of the barrier of her mind, he could still command it to fall apart or self-destruct.

After a bit of contemplation, he did not choose to do so. He believed that keeping a spiritual fragment of his in her mind did not hurt either of them, though it didn't seem to do anything particular aside from one effect.

Ves found that when he came close to Gloriana, he gained the ability to sense glimpses of her inner emotions!

In fact, what Ves perceived were the impressions that his spiritual fragment captured and relayed to him over their weak connection!

This might prove very handy. Though he felt a bit ambivalent about maintaining a constant tap in her mind, it wasn't as if she got something in return. She continually basked in his spiritual attributes and imprint and so did his spiritual fragment.

Ves predicted that this continuous exposure to each other would probably do wonders when they collaborated on a mech design project.

If their design philosophies were intimately familiar with each other, then they would probably mesh together well. The chance of incompatibilities or confrontations lessened, while the chance of beneficial interactions grew likelier.

They peacefully enjoyed their breakfast as Ves continued to weigh the merits. Just as he decided to leave matters before, Gloriana finally spoke up again.

"Since I have a lot of time on our hands, why don't we work together? You're currently working on a rifleman mech design, right?"

The depth of her collection of footage of him made it abundantly clear that she still tapped the Barracuda from time to time. Despite his precautions, there was no way he could hide his work completely from his own ship's monitoring systems.

"Yes." Ves admitted. "The Desolate Soldier is my solution against the sandman threat. It's a spaceborn ballistic rifleman mech that is designed to be cheap and easy to work with, though its real charm is that it inspires duty. Other than that, I don't think this mech falls into your comfort zone."

"I already told you, Ves. No mech of yours is beneath my attention. While I won't extend my attention to mass market mechs designed by other mech designers, you're an exception! If I want to be the perfect partner for you, then I have to grow comfortable with your work!"

She made a lot of reassurances to Ves that she wouldn't be fussy or attempt to ruin his design project. Her desire to study his current project and help in its development was so strong and sincere that Ves eventually acquitted.

"Alright. Let's head somewhere secure. I don't want to expose my design schematics too much while I still haven't published it yet."

"We can work in my workshop aboard this ship!"

Once they finished breakfast, they moved down a couple of decks until they entered a combined workshop, lab and design studio compartment. A considerable amount of space had been devoted to outfit a small but fully-featured workshop.

Ves became very impressed by the quality of the miniature lab and fabrication equipment in sight. Though hampered by their compactness, the capabilities of the Stellar Chaser's production equipment still exceeded the parameters of the Mech Nursery's production lines by a considerable degree!

"I can fabricate a copy of any of my mechs with this equipment." He breathed in astonishment. "As long as we have the right materials on hand, I can fabricate a Desolate Soldier within days!"

Gloriana pressed against his side and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I personally selected all of the production equipment here. They're very powerful and versatile. Naturally, now that you're here, what's mine is yours. You can make use of my workshop anytime you want. You can even draw upon my material stores if you like. My only demand is that you involve me as much as possible when you do your work. Is that okay?"

Ves nodded numbly. The amount of trust she put into him was incredible! "I agree!"

Her offer was far too generous for him to refuse! If he was in her shoes, he would have never given her unfettered access to his stuff!

Of course, now that he accepted her offer, he was aware that Gloriana could demand the same of him. Considering how generous she acted towards him, Ves found it very difficult to deny such a request.

The two of them sat behind a bank of terminals while their followers settled in. Nitaa and a couple of trusted Glory Battalion guards stood guard while their cats perched on top of a tall 3D printer.

"Meow." Lucky started liking Clixie's head.

"Miaow." Clixie playfully batted Lucky away.

"Meow?"

"Miaow!"

As their cats wrestled with each other for some reason, Ves hesitated in showing off his Desolate Soldier.

Though Ves truly believed in the soundness of his work, he was still afraid of her reaction. Having glimpsed her design seed, Ves knew that she always regarded imperfect mech designs with disgust.

It was her nature to take issue with imperfect mechs, and in her eyes any mass market mech design fell under this category. A mech that catered to the masses would never fit perfectly to a specific mech pilot.

Just as Ves made his decision to show off his work, Gloriana suddenly spoke up.

"That reminds me, didn't you receive that batch of ASMAS I sent?"

Huh?

"I did."

"Do you still have it or did you use it up?"

"I already incorporated it into a mech design."

She grinned. "You designed a custom mech with my gift, right?"

Ves shook his head. "Not exactly. I designed a single-copy mech but I didn't dedicate it to any particular mech pilot. It's mainly due to cost and practical constraints that I'm unable to produce more mechs."

"I believe that any mech you design that requires something as remarkable as ASMAS should be something exceptional. Why don't you show that off instead?"

"I.. eh.. Are you sure? It's a bit problematic.." Ves stammered. He already started to sweat a little.

Gloriana's face scrunched into a frown. "I thought we trusted each other. Why are you hiding your work from me? I think I deserve to see how you put my ASMAS to work!"

"It's not that! I do trust you!" He blurted out, though whether he meant it or not was another matter. "The issue is.. the mech I designed is not exactly proper."

"How so, Ves?"

"Not proper as in.. I can get in trouble with the MTA." He whispered.

"Would they censure you if they find out about your work? It's okay, Ves."

"It's worse than you think. The MTA will definitely hunt me down if they find out about my mech!"

"I trust you, Ves." She gazed at him with a reassuring smile. "Any mech you design must have a good reason to exist. Don't worry Ves, I'll keep your secret."

"It's not you I'm concerned about. It's the other people in the compartment." He gestured his arm to her guards.

"That's not a problem." She spoke. She activated her comm and activated some sort of command that activated a jammer and some other measures.

"There. I've just activated a number of precautions. We're enveloped by an isolating bubble right now. While Melody and my guards can still see us, they won't be able to observe our screens and projections."

Ves looked in each direction and discovered that everything distant turned into a blob.

"Alright." He nodded and activated his comm. "Let me show you my Devil Tiger..."

He showed off his design schematics and narrated his design choices.

Gloriana studied it with wide and eager eyes. After spending months of studying the same designs, she finally became exposed to a completely new work from Ves!

"It's... wow." She uttered and grinned while clapping her hands together. "It's a fantastic mech design! As expected of my lover! Though it would have been much more perfect if you tailored this mech to a specific customer, I understand why you couldn't. Regardless, it is still a bold and radical mech design!"

"It's a passion project. I gave my all to design this mech."

As they continued to go over the Devil Tiger design, Gloriana quickly frowned again.

"These design schematics are starting to grow a little stale. Since you used up the pure ASMAS I sent, why don't you show off your finished work?"

Ves paused a bit. This...

"Come on, Ves. The schematics can only tell so much, especially when it comes to your work. Show me your end product!"

Gloriana pleaded to him earnestly that he couldn't help but agree to her request. Besides, the Devil Tiger turned out to become a masterwork. He suddenly felt like showing off his design prowess!

With great care, Ves inputted a code to unlock the highly sensitive footage in his comm. He began to project the Devil Tiger he produced at the end.

Before he could boast to her that he crafted a masterwork mech, Gloriana suddenly let out a loud gasp.

"Ves! This mech! Is this a masterwork mech?!"

"Yup!" Ves answered confidently.

"Did you let some masterwork fabricator produce this copy on your behalf?"

"How could I? Masterwork fabricators are esteemed individuals. I could never get them to fabricate a controversial mech like the Devil Tiger!"

"Then.. you created the masterwork mech completely on your own?" She stared hungrily at the projections of the finished Devil Tiger.

"Yes. It's all me. If not for the illicit nature of my mech, I would have submitted it to the MTA to request my first masterwork certificate. It's a huge shame, but I'm confident I can reach this height again. Gloriana?"

His girlfriend fell silent as she continued to admire his work. Her breath grew more haggard until she outright started to pant. Her eyes grew so intense that they started to turn bloodshot. Her entire body started to vibrate and Ves began to sense something very intense building up in her mind!

"Ves?"

"Yes, Gloriana."

"Your masterwork mech.. is perfect. It's... as perfect as your design allows."

Uh oh. Ves began to inch back.

"I think you're mistaken. My mech is—"

"—PERFECT!"

GLoriana outright tackled Ves, causing both of them to fall from their seats!

Chapter 1518 Human Investment

Melody, who had been watching over Gloriana from a distance, quickly raced forward and dragged her rabid charge from glomping all over Ves!

For his part, he felt extraordinarily deprived. He really enjoyed their second long kiss! The pure emotion she put into showing her appreciation became so

intense that Ves even sensed their spiritualities started to touch and resonate with each other!

Both of them felt bummed out when Melody forced them apart. As Melody berated Gloriana over and over again for failing to adhere to her limits, Ves began to take a dim view of Constance Wodin.

While he understood why Gloriana's mother wanted to impose some limitations on their relationship, they were both more than thirty years old! What right did she have to treat them both like underage teenagers who barely knew their way around with love?!

Ten tiresome minutes later, Melody marched back over to the observation station in the workshop compartment and resumed whatever work she was doing.

"Sorry about that, Ves." Her big eyes looked up at him in this incredibly adorable manner.

"It's okay." He responded and modestly patted her back. He resisted pulling her into an embrace. "We have all the time in the galaxy."

She smiled at him. "I don't want to wait anymore. From the moment I saw your masterwork mech, I decided then and there that I will never let you go. I will make you mine, Ves. Mine mine mine mine mine!"

"Ehh.."

He never expected the impact of revealing his masterwork mech to be so great! He could tell that Gloriana was being serious with her words because he could sense the conviction in her spirituality!

"For me, a perfect vessel can only be formed if I meet two conditions. First, I have to design the perfect mech for a specific mech pilot. The design has to be the best possible result given the requirements I have to meet and the

limitations I have to abide by. I'm very far away from reaching this height, but I've been pursuing this ambition from the start."

This sounded a bit more flexible than Ves initially surmised. If she tried to design 'the' perfect mech, then it was practically impossible to achieve this goal! She would have to surpass every Star Designer in the past, present and future in order to design a mech considered 'perfect' in an absolute sense!

In contrast, the way she phrased her ambition made it clear that success depended on the circumstances in play. If her definition of 'perfect' meant designing a mech that fit her capabilities, the objectives she needed to meet and the practical limitations preventing her from resorting to more expensive toys, then her chances of realizing her design philosophy became a lot better!

Ves became impressed at her girlfriend. Crazy and eccentric she might be at times, she was still a clever and competent mech designer. She did not take her profession lightly.

"What's the second condition?"

"I think you can guess." She gazed lovingly at Ves as if he was a treasure.

"Just because I design the perfect vessel under the circumstances doesn't mean the physical reproduction is devoid of flaws. There is always a certain degree of variance in the fabrication and assembly of parts. A single mech can consist of more than a million different parts! No matter how careful you are in fabricating them, many parts are too intricate to stay within tight tolerances."

"Materialization technology can ensure that every part is reproduced without a single atom out of place." Ves suggested.

Her smile dropped a bit. "What I'm trying to make is the perfect vessel for a mech pilot, not the perfect mech in a vacuum. For me, the perfect vessel transcends precision engineering. One of the biggest shortcomings of

producing mechs through materialization is that no one has ever created a masterwork mech through this method. All of the mechs are completely identical and consistent in quality, I'll give them that, but they are also completely devoid of the necessary character that can elevate them to masterwork!"

This had to do with the definition of a masterwork. It was a rather vague and imprecise concept. It couldn't be quantified or codified in a way that allowed AIs and algorithms to identify them. Only experts and insiders of a profession could recognize a masterwork on the spot because only they possessed the intuitive judgement that allows them to recognize if a work holistically surpassed the sum of its parts.

For this reason, a product materialized into existence without the intervention of a craftsman could merely be described as a precise reproduction, rather than a masterful reproduction.

Whether it came to the production of mechs, combat armor or personal firearms, a true masterwork had always been created by hand by an eminent craftsman.

Of course, materialization technology did not slow down just because of this flaw. As long as a manufacturer could afford to implement this tech, then the machine-like consistency and complete lack of variance allowed for incredibly efficient and reliable production of extremely complex goods.

Most manufacturers were more than willing to give up the miniscule, almost nonexistent chance of producing a masterwork to rid themselves of so many inefficiencies!

Ves did not agree, though, and neither did Gloriana. He felt a bit more closer after finding out they shared the same views on the matter.

"Materialization technology has its merits, but as someone who fabricated a masterwork mech, I think many mech designers are missing out on the wonders of producing masterworks. Ever since I fabricated my masterwork Devil Tiger, I can tell you that my intuitive understanding and feel towards mechs has increased. Whether it's designing mechs or fabricating them, I've become noticeably better."

"You're referring to the mech affinity theory, right?"

He nodded. "After experiencing the effects myself, I fully believe in it. It's not a lie. It's especially valuable at our current stage when we are still improving rapidly. The earlier you enjoy this boost, the smoother you progress."

Gloriana couldn't help but hug herself against him yet again! "Hihihi! You shameless boaster! Not everyone can be as exceptional as you! I'm so lucky to find such a wonderful mech designer who made his first masterwork mech just a year after being recognized as a Journeyman! I think you even set a record!"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure about that. I've heard that some freakish Apprentices have managed to fabricate masterworks as well."

"That doesn't matter. You have everything I've wished for, Ves. I truly regret that I only sent that batch of pure ASMAS to you. I should have known you would have used it to create a fantastic masterwork mech! I won't make that mistake again! I've decided to stay with you permanently now. Even if my mother wants to drag me back, I won't let her! Promise me you'll keep me with you, Ves."

The intense way she pressed up at him and gazed in his eyes made it extraordinarily difficult for Ves to resist!

"I.. as long as our relationship works out, I'll follow you wherever you go. I don't want you to fallout with your family. If your mother summons you back to the Hegemony, I'll accompany you until they kick me out."

She grinned brilliantly at him. "Great! You're so sweet, Ves. I'll make sure it doesn't come to that. Now that I'm sure of my decision, I'll do my best to make the Wodin Dynasty accept you. It will be a tough road but I am sure you'll impress them with your masterworks."

"It's not that easy to make a masterwork mech." Ves cautioned her. "You can't make them on demand. They are products of chance, effort, skill and serendipity. It may take years or decades before I can replicate this feat."

"If you can do it once, you can do it again. That's the case with everyone who created a masterwork." She stated confidently. "This will be the key to earning my mother, and by extension my dynasty's approval. Our matriarch would be crazy to ignore you just because you're a third-rater!"

"You Hexers really don't think much of people who originate from third-rate states, do you?"

"I don't deny we are prejudiced against your kind. I think we have the tendency to be biased against people like you because your low births and lack of wealth limits your development. After all, look at me for example. You don't want to know how much hex credits my mother spent to upgrade my genes, augment me with implants and hire renowned tutors. Can any mech designer from the Bright Republic match my advantages?"

"Uhh.."

"My mother spent so much not just because she loves me, but also to invest in me. All the money put into raising me and turning me into a great mech designer is a targeted plan to foster a talented Wodin mech designer. I'm very

much aware that I would have never become so great at what I do if not for enjoying this treatment."

Her words forced Ves to look at her in a different way. Though she worked hard to become a talented Journeyman, it was undeniable that her mother enabled most of her success.

It also meant that she owed a very huge debt to the Wodin Dynasty!

"So your mother doesn't want you to enter into a relationship with a poor and impoverished Brighter because they think I'll limit you, is that right? They expect to get a much better return on their investment if you are paired with a much more capable Hexer mech designer who enjoyed similarly lavish treatment."

She nodded. "That's exactly right. While I admit that there are many fine boys back at home, none of them are as suitable as you. I have to say that you're not a slouch yourself. You managed to achieve just as much if not more than me despite your humbler background. That should have been a point in favor of you, but my obstinate mother doesn't really see your kind as equals to Hexers."

"I see. We'll just have to prove her wrong, then. While I am not trying to boast here, some of the things I've done in the past have more than made up for the disparity you've described."

"Yes. Your record does mention something mysterious about looting a crashed CFA warship. Please don't blame me, but I also took body scans and samples of your DNA during our first meeting and had our geneticists analyze your state. Your physical state is very impressive!"

"But not enough to convince your mother that I'm worthy?"

She shook her head. "She can be a bit old-fashioned sometimes. In her eyes, you have a lot of potential, but your upbringing is too average. She doesn't

expect you to realize your potential as much as I do. The only way for us to change her mind on you is to prove that you are already more fantastic than my suitors in the Hegemony. Providing undeniable proof that you've fabricated a masterwork mech is key! It's even better if we both collaborated on a masterwork, because that enormously increases my own value!"

All of this sounded rather unfair at first, but Ves knew that he needed to go above and beyond if he wanted to gain the approval of a powerful dynasty of the Hexadric Hegemony.

In any case, as long as he passed this difficult test, then the Wodin Dynasty would definitely accept him with open arms! He wouldn't have to face their continued disapproval!

"So we can quell all dissent as long as I show off another masterwork, is that right? We can't show the Wodin Dynasty my Devil Tiger, though. I'll just have to make a proper masterwork mech that won't land me in trouble, then!"

He became incredibly motivated to replicate his earlier feat!

"Not any mech will do, Ves. My mother won't acknowledge a worthless third-class masterwork mech no matter how impressive it is put together. The only way to get my stupid family to acknowledge you properly is to present them with a second-class masterwork mech that one of our mech pilots can put to use immediately!"

A second-class masterwork mech! His heart sunk down as soon as he heard this demand.

To fabricate a masterwork mech, it was essential that Ves possessed a high familiarity and feel for its design and overall mech class. His lack of experience with second-class mechs meant that it would be incredibly hard to achieve a state that could bring him close to producing a masterwork!

This meant that if Ves truly wanted to spend the rest of his life together with Gloriana, then he needed to immerse himself in second-class mechs!

Chapter 1519 Shared Passion

Ever since Gloriana revealed the standard that Ves needed to meet to earn her mother's approval, Ves continually sank into thought.

He already enjoyed Gloriana's company. He found her to be delightful and supportive of him, so much so that Ves did not mind the idea of becoming a permanent item.

Not only did he stand to gain a lot of practical benefits from their union, he believed he could trust her with all of his secrets.

However, the Wodin Dynasty sure expected much from any man who wished to capture her heart.

With all of the bias and lack of faith directed towards him, the only way for him to break their poor impression of him was to prove he had the capability to fabricate a second-class mech!

Yet how much effort did he have to make to reach this point? He couldn't just pick a random mech design and fabricate it a thousand times. Ves believed he needed to design his own second-class mech to open up the option of making a suitable masterwork, but that entailed becoming intimately familiar with these kinds of machines.

Ves already envisioned a very busy schedule ahead of him due to his desire to fill up the LMC's catalog of third-class mechs. He had way too many things to do to squeeze in additional study of second-class mechs.

Unless... he made use of a time-saving tool like the System!

His eyes grew a bit brighter.

He knew that ordinary third-rate mech designers had an immensely tough time trying to adapt to the standard of mechs in second-rate states. The fact that no promising mech designer from the Bright Republic who emigrated to the Friday Coalition or the Hexadric Hegemony managed to advance to Master was proof!

While Ves knew that exceptions of this rule existed elsewhere in the galaxy, he still recognized that he needed to put an immense amount of effort into learning a brand-new class of mechs.

Fortunately, he possessed more means to do so. He already became exposed to many of the technologies used in second-class mechs through his higher-tiered Skills and Sub-Skills. Much of what he learned only really became relevant when his budget and tech standard surpassed a certain height.

Gloriana also promised to help him as well.

"I'll tutor you as much as I can about second-class mechs." She spoke with conviction. "Since we're going to be together anyway, I can instruct you as often as it's convenient to us. Within a decade or less, I hope you become just as fluent in designing second-class mechs as me. I don't think any Journeyman is willing to dedicate as much time as me in bringing you up to speed."

Ves hugged her closer to him. He really enjoyed feeling her warm body against his own. "Thank you, Gloriana, but you shouldn't neglect your own development. I think I can manage with some light instruction. I won't be able to master second-class mechs if my perspective is distorted by your own. I need to develop my own understanding."

As a mech designer, Gloriana knew what he was worried about. A similar dynamic existed when teaching or mentoring apprentices.

"You won't learn as fast if I'm not there to hold your hand."

"I think I'll manage. Let me try first, and if my progress isn't good enough a few years from now, we can try something else. For now, it's important for my principal development to design a lot of mechs for the Bright Republic and other comparable mech markets."

If he switched over to designing second-class mechs right away, then he would have to waste valuable years while he tried to reinvent the wheel. Not only that, he needed some way of breaking into the mech market of a much more advanced and foreign state.

The progression of a mech designer did not really depend on the class of mechs. He still believed it would be useful for him to expand his range into both third and second-class mechs.

Ves and Gloriana discussed their upcoming plans. For now, Ves wanted to focus on his existing plans and study up on second-class mechs in his spare time.

While Gloriana did not have any obligations per se, Ves did not wish for her to waste all of her time in assisting him in his own projects.

"I think it's best if you revive your Flawless Mech Workshop and fulfill some commissions on your own." He said. "Even if you're away from the Hegemony, you can still do your work by remote."

She firmly shook her head. "I don't want to. You don't have to be worried about my progression. I think it will be a true pleasure to help you design your mechs. Just like how it's best for you if you start to learn how to design a second-class mech, I think it will benefit me as well if I expand my range to third-class mechs. I can make just as much progress in the Bright Republic by adapting and modifying your mech designs into perfect vessels to some of your customers."

"Really?" He questioned.

"Mmhmm." Gloriana cutely leaned her head on his shoulder. "I don't think working in the Bright Republic is a waste of my time. Not only will I be able to step out of the box and learn an entirely new framework of mech design, I'll also get to work by your side! The more we collaborate, the more we become proficient in combining our specialties. If we want to bring out the most in each other, then we need to work together as much as possible."

This was the logic between mech designer pairings. Two creators who shared the same profession but approached their work from different directions could combine each other's efforts in fantastic ways!

However, such a desirable outcome did not come about instantly. A long-term partnership was essential, and no partnership was as stable and enduring as a marriage!

Ves decided to test how well they could work together. "Let me show you my Desolate Soldier design like I originally planned. While my current design project has reached an advanced stage, I hope you can provide me with some valuable input."

He turned back to the terminal and tried his best to load in his design schematics. Gloriana kept leaning her body against his own as she studied the schematics and other data on the ballistic rifleman mech.

This time, Ves did not narrate his design choices or overall logic behind his design. He wanted Gloriana to make her own judgement on his work.

He watched her reaction carefully over the next hour as she immersed herself into the Desolate Soldier design.

From time to time, Gloriana winced or frowned as she studied something she found troubling.

Ves noted that she reacted most strongly when she encountered the outcomes of his decision to opt for something cheap rather than powerful.

Since his goal was to design an affordable mech, he made a lot of compromises and settled for inferior performance in exchange for minimizing cost and complexity.

To a mech designer who was used to designing mechs worth tens or hundreds of billions of bright credits a piece, the abject performance metrics of his affordable mech must be a huge shock to her! At least with his premium mechs, Ves could boast about some of their strengths, but the main merit of his latest work was that it didn't cost a lot of money!

Gloriana breathed deeply and closed her eyes. Her mild reaction belied the storm that raged in her head.

Through his spiritual fragment stuck in her mind, Ves witnessed glimpses of intense responses against his work.

Though a part of her probably found her design repulsive, she exerted a very strong desire to tolerate his work. Her surprisingly strong will exerted too much pressure onto her old beliefs that her design seed bowed down its head in the face of her determination!

In her desire to make it possible for her to collaborate with Ves as much as possible, she was willing to adjust the direction of her design philosophy!

Ves truly became speechless as he realized the immensity of her inner struggle. He couldn't help but respect her and appreciate her more.

Eventually, she finished her study.

"Okay, I've thoroughly familiarized myself with your work." She spoke calmly, belying the huge turmoil she just went through. "It's... very different from what

I used to. I'm astounded by how inventive mech designers like you have to be to design a mech with limited limited resources."

Obviously, Gloriana did not wish to reveal how much she went through in order to avoid any disharmony.

Ves leaned his head against her own, brushing against her exquisite, soft hair. "I know my Desolate Soldier design can be.. underwhelming, but mechs at this price range sell the most in the mech markets where my company is competing in. You have to take into account that there are many mech buyers who don't have the budget to buy expensive mechs, hire skilled mech pilots, retain a proper maintenance crew and stock up on ample supplies."

"I thought only pirates are this desperate."

He let out a snort. "Trust me. There are lots of outfits who don't really invest as much money and resources as they should in building up their mech forces. So what do you think of my work?"

"It's very.. basic, I shall say. That's not necessarily bad, because I understand your intention. You've achieved an impressive level of performance from what little you have to work with. I know I would have never been able to make as much use of the same set of resources. However..."

"However?"

"I see that the intent of your mech is to be as compatible with as many mech pilots as possible. You've even dumbed down or automated some of the operations of the mech to accommodate very.. low-skilled mech pilots."

Ves nodded. "It's because the sandman crisis has rendered many of our melee mechs useless. The Bright Republic and many other states under threat are suffering from an acute shortage of ranged mechs. Many mech pilots proficient in melee combat are being forced to learn a new skillset in a matter of months."

He explained to her about the situation, causing her to get up to speed on how desperate the situation had become.

She frowned. "I see. This is worse than I thought. I can accept why you've simplified your mech to such a degree, but still, I see some room for improvement in your implementation."

"Oh? Do tell please."

In the next half hour, Gloriana began to point out various small aspects where Ves could refine his simplification efforts. She also pointed out some other areas which she thought that Ves might need to think on a bit further.

This was the first time since he embarked on this design project that he received feedback from a peer.

Through her advice, suggestions and opinions, Ves became exposed to her design style and knowledge base.

While she wasn't as perverse as him who already reached Senior-level in several fundamental Skills, her depth of knowledge really astounded him. In spite of coming up short compared to him, her utilization of existing knowledge was a lot higher.

That meant that while she didn't know as many theories as him, she was a bit more adept at applying the theories she was already familiar with. This led Ves to accept several of her minor suggestions.

"Wow." He spoke. "I really appreciate your feedback. You're really insightful."

She grinned at him. "You're no slouch, yourself. Despite the simplicity of your Desolate Soldier design, it's also surprisingly deep. There are plenty of aspects that are simply beyond me. Why don't you explain them to me, hmm?"

"Sure. I might as well repay you for how much of a help you've been so far."

A spark formed between them as they exchanged their own views. Ves truly felt that they grew closer to each other, not just romantically, but also professionally.

Ves truly became enamored in the joy of sharing his passion with a woman who was equally as passionate in their work!

Chapter 1520 Six Phases of Existence

Their first collaborative feedback and design session lasted for the rest of the day. Ves and Gloriana became so immersed in their discussions that they opted to eat lunch and dinner in the workshop compartment!

The collision of ideas, the sharing of insights and the need to explain one's own thoughts provided plenty of intellectual stimulation.

Even if the actual changes Ves planned to make in his design did not amount to much at the end, he still felt he gained a greater awareness over his own design.

Having to explain and justify many of his design choices was much like teaching in a way. Even if he rehashed his existing theories, being forced to explain them and package them in a way that allowed him to communicate his points succinctly increased his familiarity with them, thereby directly increasing his utilization in the process.

In addition to sharing their objective theories, they also started to exchange their subjective principles and viewpoints.

Both of them began to unveil aspects of their design philosophies to each other.

For example, Gloriana applied her expertise in designing perfect vessels into feedback aimed at increasing the compatibility of his Desolate Soldier to a wider range of mech pilots.

Ves became astounded by how some of her advice hit home.

"For someone who insists on designing the perfect vessel for a single, specific mech pilot, you're quite good at finding ways on making mechs more adaptable to many customers."

Gloriana continued to lean against him with her soft body. In fact, other than a brief bathroom break, she never left his side!

"It's not as contradictory as you think, Ves. If you think about it, I specialize in adapting mechs to mech pilots. While I mainly focus on complete and total adaptation to a single subject, I meet all kinds of customers. Of course, I haven't dealt with mech pilots as bad as the ones in your states, but I've already dealt with a wide range of personalities, inclinations and skill sets. This means that I can rapidly estimate how well a given mech design can accommodate a whole gamut of people."

"That's quite impressive."

She grinned happily at him. "So are you. The ideas you've introduced to me today are so radical that I don't even know where to begin!"

Neither of them went too deep into revealing their design philosophies to each other. Ves knew that she still withheld most of her specialty because it simply didn't apply to this case.

As for Ves, while he pretty much accepted her as his girlfriend, he still wanted to take his time. He stuck to a shallow introduction of his specialty. He first wanted her to accept some of his guiding principles and concepts before he revealed more.

"Mechs are alive." He repeated. "There is a living, beating heart inside them, and we have a responsibility to make their bodies as coherent as possible. Some of the design choices I've made don't make that much sense when you regard a mech as a mechanical machine. Yet when you understand that my

Design Soldier has to conform to the concept of duty, my choices aren't baffling anymore."

"The gods you create must be carried by worthy vessels." Gloriana nodded seriously. "

His smile twitched a bit when he heard her repeat her nonsense about 'creating gods'. To be frank, Ves felt increasingly more guilty about deceiving her. That nonsense story about divinity he told the MTA should have been buried in the MTA's massive archives!

At this point, he decided to come clean. "Gloriana. I.. I think you are misunderstanding something. The recording you've obtained from the MTA.. it's not entirely accurate. I didn't really believe that I was creating gods. Back then, I deliberately exaggerated my design philosophy to the point of absurdity because I don't want the MTA to learn what I really do. The truth is much less.. radical."

His serious tone caused Gloriana to stop hugging him for a moment. She took one of her hands in her own and turned towards him with a grave expression.

"You don't have to be so afraid." She squeezed his hand. "I support you no matter how far you go in your design philosophy. The proto-gods I've sensed in your mechs aren't lies. How can you deny the extraordinary miracles you are capable of performing? You can be honest with me! I will be at your side every step of the way. Just don't leave me out when you create your gods!"

"Gloriana! Didn't you listen to me?! My design philosophy doesn't revolve around divinity at all!"

Her smile never subsided. She continued to gaze at him with a loving gaze. "I can scarcely imagine the gods we can create together. Just like with your Transcendent Messengers, I want to be a part of the creation of gods that can

act as guardians of their states. What you did for the Ylvaine Protectorate is a model of the future of our collaborative efforts!"

Times like these reminded Ves that Gloriana hadn't changed that much at all. She just made an effort into hiding some of her Hexer-ness when she was in his presence.

Only when certain topics rose up did she reveal her conviction in her kooky beliefs. She was so fanatical about them that she outright rejected any answers that clashed with her own fervently-held beliefs!

No matter what kind of logic or facts he brought up, anything that matched her hexism beliefs was inviolable!

He sighed. "I told you over and over again that I'm not a follower of hexism. I don't ascribe to any of its tenets."

"As I said, that's okay. Hexism isn't as strict as you think. It's a philosophy and an acknowledgement of the truth more than a cult. Life, death, gods, man and so on are all intertwined. What is dead can come to life. What is human can ascend to god. Your design philosophy already encapsulates these concepts. You create new life from something that is not supposed to be alive!"

Ves began to grow more and more uncomfortable. The most vexing aspect about Gloriana's misunderstandings was that some of her beliefs actually held some kernels of truth! This made it much more difficult for him to refute her assumptions!

"What does hexism's obsession with the number six have to do with all of this?" He waved his hand.

He already became exposed to the blatant influence of hexism aboard the Stellar Chaser.

They always ate six-course meals.

Gloriana always wore clothes with six buttons or something.

Their data pads came with six sides.

His guest room featured six potted plants.

There was no rhyme or reason why certain stuff had to come in six! It was driving him nuts!

She giggled at him. "Oh Ves, you're so adorable when you look so lost. Hexism isn't easy to get into, but I'll explain this the best I can. We don't worship the number six because it's some magical number. We pay tribute to the six phases of existence: life, death, godhood, damnation, dust, woman."

??

What?

Ves became so perplexed when he heard about this so-called 'six phases of existence' that he felt like scratching his head until he became bald!

Why was 'woman' a distinct phase of existence? He could definitely tell that women had a definite hand in the spread of hexism!

"I'll be honest, Gloriana. I don't understand a thing about what you just said."

"You don't have to. Hexism is a universal truth. We are describing the actual state of existences irrespective of the lenses we adopt to explain our origin and our future. We apply the number six in our daily lives as a way to acknowledge this truth and to make an appeal to specific phases of existence. For example, a man like you should kiss me six times in the morning every day in order to appease the phase of woman!"

He looked at her weirdly. "If you want me to kiss you six times in the morning, you don't have to make up an excuse."

"That's good!" She grinned and shook with excitement. "We can enjoy ourselves while at the same time pay tribute to the most supreme phase of existence!"

Truly, discussing anything about hexism was just asking for trouble! Ves really did not wish to go down the rabbit hole any further!

"I think I've heard enough. Please don't expect me to be as.. immersed in hexism as you. I respect your beliefs, but don't expect me to pray in front of six candles or anything."

"You don't need to do anything like that, Ves. You're already doing great things for hexism by creating gods! It is a privilege for me to be a part of your efforts into making one of the phases of existence more tangible in the form of your mechs!"

For the sake of his sanity, Ves outright dropped the subject and pivoted to another topic.

"Let's go leave this workshop and enjoy the rest of the evening. We've already discussed my Desolate Soldier design all day."

"Okay."

They finally left the workshop compartment and went to the lounge compartment. They sat on the same loveseat as last time with each other's cats resting on their laps.

"Meow." Lucky looked up at Gloriana with a pleading expression.

"Oh, you're such a cute and sophisticated cat, Lucky!" Gloriana playfully fed him an exotic. "Do you approve of me? Do you think I'm a good woman for Ves?"

"Meow!"

Ever since Ves boarded the Stellar Chaser, Lucky entered into a paradise. Not only did he have Clixie to relieve his boredom, the exotics that Gloriana fed him were much more expensive and potent than the barely worthless space rocks that consisted of his usual diet!

As far as he was concerned, Ves should already shack up with Gloriana so that the supply of expensive exotics would never stop!

In the meantime, Ves found Clixie to be surprisingly companionable to him. As soon as she realized that he understood her, Clixie began to regard him fondly!

"Miaow."

"Oh, you want me to scratch you behind your ears? Okay."

"Miaow miaow."

"I'll tell Gloriana that you want more fish in your diet."

"Miaaaaow."

"Hehe. You're so soft and fluffy. Lucky doesn't really have fur, so hugging him is like hugging a metal pipe!"

Once they had their fill of pampering each other's pets, they began to address something of import.

"Are you still serious about this grand expedition of yours?" She asked.

"I haven't changed my mind. I still intend to visit the wider galaxy. Don't you want to go anymore?"

"I still want to!" She quickly replied. "It's just that if we take such a lengthy multi-decade trip, I want our starting conditions to be as perfect as possible. A ship like the Stellar Chaser won't cut it for the expedition we have in mind. Only a fully-fledged factory ship will enable us to keep up our mech production

no matter where we go. We also need plenty of strong escorts to protect such a valuable ship, as well as ourselves!"

"The expense is enormous." He said. "There's no way you can pay for it, right?"

She shook her head. "No. I've approached my mother and some of the Wodins and they've all told me that they aren't willing to bankroll such an expensive expedition. They think I can make just as much progress at home where they don't need to waste so many hex credits. They don't understand!"

"Then.. maybe we should settle for something cheaper and less modest."

"NO! Absolutely not! That's unacceptable, Ves! We are not going to enjoy our sweet time together on a tiny rustbucket that won't offer enough room to raise our six children!"

Ves decided to ignore her comment about having six children. "Then what options do we have?"

"I've figured out two different solutions. The one I came up with earlier is to solicit external investors. We are basically pledging investors a share of our future earnings in exchange for a hefty investment up front. Much like any other business."

That did not sound attractive to Ves!

"What about the other option?"

"I only came up with this when you revealed your capabilities to me. Instead of attracting external investment that comes with a lot of strings attached, we should instead earn all of the money ourselves by selling enough masterwork custom mechs to wealthy Hexer clients!"