

Mech 1651

Chapter 1651 Bentheim's Strength

The Bentheim System had never come under attack by an external enemy since the Bright Republic colonized it. It shone as the brightest and most valuable jewel of a state that had endured frequent aggression.

That did not mean that Bentheim never saw violence. On the contrary, the gangs and influences that made up Bentheim's lucrative economy constantly warred for supremacy.

These underground conflicts rarely bothered average Bentheimers as the conflicts all took place in the more remote parts of the planet. The Bentheim Planetary Guard helplessly allowed these gang wars to occur, knowing that the collateral damage would grow much worse if they intervened!

Aside from the underground organizations competing over turf, the greatest threat to Bentheim had always been the Bentheim Liberation Movement.

Founded by disgruntled locals who objected to the central government's penchant of raiding their planet's coffers to support the rest of the state, the BLM violently advocated for independence.

Due to the huge proportion of wealth being stolen right in front of their eyes, many locals supported the separatist organization.

The BLM received much sympathy and support, so much so that they had been able to come back time and time again each time the authorities struck a huge blow!

Not only that, but the terrorist attacks they perpetrated always resulted in a huge amount of death and property damage!

Their indiscriminate attacks turned their organization into a very polarizing existence. Most of the lower classes on Bentheim supported their cause, while the more well-off citizens hated their guts.

To the latter, the central government's decision to grant a complete blanket amnesty to the BLM sat very poorly with them! Every single rebel received a second chance, including the masterminds responsible for planning attacks that harvested thousands of lives, many of which were local Bentheimers who were just in the wrong place at the wrong time!

"I'll never give them! Once a murderer, always a murderer!"

Captain Melinda Larkinson gritted her teeth as her modified Desolate Soldier sortied out of one of the Planetary Guard's combat carriers.

As much as she wanted to turn her mech against her former enemies, she knew better than to disobey orders. She was a Larkinson, after all. This was no place to settle her private grudges.

"Keep up, men!" She commanded her lagging subordinates. "Don't show any weakness in front of the scum!"

No Bentheimer expected their first external enemy to be the alien sandmen. Everyone believed that the star system would face its first true opponent in the form of the ambitious Vesians.

Each and every war between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom always revolved around Bentheim. The latter tried so hard to take it over and they came closer than ever to achieving this dream a few years ago.

Bentheim had always been prepared to repel their expected invaders. Due to Bentheim's immense importance, it was one of the most protected star systems in the Bright Republic.

Even while the situation at the front worsened with each passing day, the Mech Corps insisted on stationing entire mech divisions in space and on land!

No matter how many sandmen fleets came to batter the economic center of the state, the Mech Corps was fully prepared to defend the pivotal star system to the death!

If that wasn't enough, the Starfighter Corps and the auxiliary forces in charge of running the abundant amount of defensive platforms pitched in as well.

All of the branches of the military invested significantly in fortifying this pivotal star system.

Losing Bentheim would spell the end of the Bright Republic!

Fortunately, the military wasn't alone in defending Bentheim.

Along with the Planetary Guard, the vigorous private sector outfits largely answered the call, not that they had much choice. Through multiple means, the authorities compelled every outfit and security company that had sat out the initial stages of the Sand War to defend their home planet.

In addition to these somewhat respectable outfits, a large amount of 'irregular' forces deployed as well.

These consisted of the rag-tag street gangs that formed the bottom rung of Bentheim's underground community to the more impressive organizations such as the Blood Claws.

Sadly for Melinda, the former cells of the Bentheim Liberation Movement also made an appearance.

Part of the deal called for the pardoned rebels to fight the sandmen. The government officials, in their infinite wisdom, decided that the best way to motivate the BLM into action was to assign them to protect their own homes!

As a consequence, a substantial chunk of mechs deployed in this part of the Bentheim System formerly belonged to the BLM!

Many of the mechs looked just as shabby and disorganized than before. Melinda's eyes itches as she beheld the familiar coatings and markings on their exterior.

If it was in the past, she would have engaged the BLM mechs without any hesitation!

Now, she was under strict orders to avoid any aggressive moves against the rebels. They were allies, now. For better or worse, they had to lay down their swords against each other.

Time passed as entire screens of mechs and starfighters deployed to meet the incoming enemy.

The Mech Corps smartly positioned the mech forces of the Bentheim Liberation Movement far away from the Planetary Guard. With plenty of private outfits in between, no friction should have taken place.

Her mech received a private comm call. Though it was not really proper for her to accept it, this was an exceptional situation.

"Melinda." A projection of Raella's face emerged.

"Raella. You're a part of this battle as well?"

"I would never miss out on this party!" The Blood Captain grinned. "This will be a battle for the history books."

"I'm not so sure about that. The combined sandman fleet we're about to engage isn't enough to penetrate Bentheim."

"Details, details. Don't die on me, Melinda. I like you too much to see you gone."

"You too. Good luck and good hunting."

They kept their conversation short as this was no time to chat. Exchanging a few words was enough to warm Melinda's heart and steel herself for the battle to come.

"No sandman will ravage Bentheim on my watch." She muttered. "The tragedy of Sydney Superior will not happen again!"

Every mech pilot about to fight the sandmen vividly recalled the news of Sydney Superior's fall. The fall of a major planet of the Bright Republic had set off a wave of fear, followed by a wave of indignation!

Everyone became angry! The sandmen could not be allowed to massacre Brighters with impunity!

"The enemy is nearing into effective engagement range! Follow the plan and stay in formation!"

The first sandman fleet that managed to arrive in the Bentheim System appeared very formidable.

These days, many sandman admirals no longer traveled with their own fleets but combined their forces with other admirals to increase their chances of survival.

The fleet right now consisted of the dreaded swarm configuration, and a giant one at that. A cloud of over a million individual drones, each of which were strong enough to match a starfighter, approached Bentheim as if there was nothing in its way to threaten its advance!

The defenders were eager to prove the sandmen wrong!

The Mech Corps deployed an entire mech division this time. The 3rd Bentheim Division received the honor of being the first to welcome the sandmen to Bentheim!

An overwhelming amount of auxiliary forces, private outfits and irregular units made up the rest. The coordination between these disparate groups of mechs was very chaotic, and it was impossible to expect anything better.

The final and most crucial element that made up their lineup was tens of thousands of starfighters.

Since Bentheim was the heart of the Bright Republic's industry, it was the first to welcome the second generation of starfighters. All of the locally-stationed starfighter regiments received the first batches of second generation starfighters which offered substantially thicker frontal armor in exchange for reduced mobility.

Right now, none of the starfighters making up the vanguard of their lineup moved out of place. Each and every starfighter pilot stationed at Bentheim enjoyed much more training than their counterparts stationed at the front.

While this meant that the starfighter pilots also lacked a lot of practical experience, the higher ups gladly accepted this tradeoff.

More training meant more discipline. This would be crucially important in the days to come as the sandmen would likely come and test their defenses frequently.

"They've come!"

The long-ranged mechs fired first. Hundreds of specialist mechs from the 3rd Bentheim Division fired all manner of railguns, gauss rifles and kinetic rifles at the approaching swarm.

Their firepower, while powerful and deadly, hardly made a dent against the approaching swarm.

However, the mechs quickly fired their second and third salvos at a respectable pace. What Melinda found most admirable was that the marksman mechs managed to land most of their hits!

"Even I can't match this level of accuracy!"

Though the sandman swarm slowly diminished, it was far too slow to whittle it down before it arrived at its destination.

To stop the sandmen, the defenders had to put up a greater fight!

"Watch out! Heat signatures are spiking! The swarm is about to fire!"

The skies ran red as the sandmen released countless lasers against their opponents!

Though most lasers missed due to the imperfect targeting methods of the sandmen, many of them managed to score some blows against starfighters and mechs!

Some starfighters outright blasted apart as even their improved frontal armor couldn't resist the tide of thirty simultaneous laser hits!

During the initial rounds of fighting, the formation of mechs and starfighters had already been flying backwards. They just moderated their relative velocity in order to allow the sandman swarm to creep up towards them. The most effective range to engage the sandmen was at medium range!

As the sandmen constantly closed, the formation sped up until they would be able to maintain medium range against the closing sandmen.

Once they moved faster, the fateful order had come.

"Activate your particle generators and fire at will! Let the sandman dread the sight of our Stripes of Humanity!"

Almost every mech and starfighter fired at the approaching swarm, taking out tens of thousands of sandman drones in the first salvo!

Simultaneously, the machines each released stripes of different colors. The most discerning observers would be able to identify the allegiance of the units releasing the stripes by their color and numbers.

For example, as Melinda glanced to the side, she saw that the detachment of hundreds of Blood Claw mechs were still going strong!

With so many Blood Claw mechs proudly firing their Sandbreaker rifles at the sandmen, Raella should have been alright.

Melinda shook her head and focused back on her actual tasks. She could not allow herself to become distracted!

"Bentheim will never fall!"

Sandman drones fell in droves as various rounds violently slammed against them! Though the quantity of sandman drones was prodigious, the sandman admirals paid a very heavy price. Only a glancing hit saved the drones from succumbing immediately!

Melinda noted that she had only taken four sandman drones with her shots so far. "Not enough! I can do better!"

Though she had been trained in marksmanship, her skill with a rifle wasn't exceptional. The Planetary Guard didn't emphasize lethal weapons either, which made it difficult for her to keep up her practice.

Nonetheless, she was still a Larkinson. It was her duty to protect the innocent!

Even if she never imagined that she would participate in a war like this, she never intended to shirk her duty!

The ferocity shown by the human defenders quickly unsettled the sandman swarm. Though their numbers still overwhelmed the defenders, their weak lasers failed to kill the second generation starfighters fast enough!

Whereas before they used to fall in droves, now their rate of casualties had become much more manageable, especially as the heavily-damaged craft pulled back in time!

The first battle between the sandmen and defenders of Bentheim ended without any suspense.

Bentheim was too strong!

Chapter 1652 Deteriorating Economy

The first battle of Bentheim shocked the Bright Republic and everyone who lived in the Bentheim region.

Though plenty of people warned that the sandmen would descend upon Bentheim like moths to a flame, they never thought that a single breach at the frontlines would result in an immediate deep incursion!

The same reason that made Bentheim such an attractive star system to travel towards also encouraged many sandman fleets to flock to it. This was because traveling to Bentheim as opposed to a regular star system was akin to travelling along the path of least resistance to the sandman fleets.

The outcome that many Brighters feared but expected had come true!

"This will be the first of many attacks, Ves." Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson cautioned. "And when Bentheim is within reach, Cloudy Curtain might also welcome the sandmen in time."

Ves rapped his fingers against his desk in thought. "I'm not entirely comfortable with the amount of forces ready to defend our star system. I know that we don't merit much priority due to our lack of development, but it still seems as if we're being neglected."

"The Mech Corps and the Starfighter Corps can't be everywhere. They have to allocate their forces as prudently as possible. From what Benjamin has told me, the military has made some very unpleasant choices. The reason why the Mech Corps only stationed a small detachment at Cloudy Curtain so far is because it isn't important."

"It isn't important?!" Ves looked offended. "Cloudy Curtain is no longer the sleepy rural planet that no one has ever heard of! We've settled billions of refugees here! We're an important center for food production!"

"The brass are aware. The difference is that they don't value them very much. When you have to make a lot of difficult choices in a very short amount of time, you'll resort to the most pragmatic solution instead of the more compassionate alternatives."

The implications of Raymond's words were clear.

"You mean.. the Bright Republic is more than willing to sacrifice Cloudy Curtain to the sandmen?"

"Yes. This is the tradeoff the higher ups have made after analyzing the reasons for the fall of the border states. The analysts have discovered that the more compassionate a state tries to be, the faster the sandmen manage to dismantle it. Unlike us, the sandmen are completely unfeeling. While their coordination and intelligence are lacking, their choices are often the most harshest one at hand because they don't care about their lives."

"So the Bright Republic has essentially decided that the strategically-important star systems such as Bentheim, Rittersberg and New Foundation have to be preserved at all costs. Less important star systems like Cloudy Curtain can just be left to their own devices because it's too costly to defend them, is that right?"

"There's no point in harboring any resentment against the government. Bentheim truly needs the protection, as the sandmen love to batter port systems."

Ves sighed. "I know that there is also an enormous economic incentive to preserve our only port system."

They all had to accept that the government was unlikely to weaken Bentheim's defenses in order to reinforce weaker star systems.

The people in charge only wanted the Bright Republic to survive. The fall of a lesser star system didn't weigh in their minds at all. Why should they care over losing a relatively insignificant planet when they can sleep peacefully with the comfort that Bentheim was so well defended that the sandmen had to invest enormously to crack open its shell!

"What response do you wish to make in light of this development?"

"Reinforce the Silver Sentinels as much as you can. Also.. make some preparations for evacuation. I know we don't have as many ships as we like, but make sure we can cut and run within a day."

"We're already in the process of bolstering the Silver Sentinels. As for the latter, it's impossible to get our hands on more ships."

Ves frowned. "A lot of refugee ships should have fallen in the government's hands, right? Why hasn't the state employed them to evacuate the Sydney Superior System and other star systems in the crosshairs?"

"The same reason that applies to the lack of forces at Cloudy Curtain also applies to the lack of mass evacuations Sydney Superior. The government doesn't value the lives of the citizens who used to live in Sydney Superior high enough. Many of the ships that

have fallen in the government's hands are mostly employed to support the infrastructure related to the production and shipping of starfighters and related goods."

"Ah." Ves understood. "A massive quantity of starfighters are being produced throughout all of the Bright Republic. While they are individually cheap, they all require a lot of materials to produce. Once they are built, they all have to be shipped to the appropriate destinations."

There was a price for resorting to quantity. The increased logistical burden of employing other weapon platforms was the main reason why they fell out favor. Mechs were much more convenient in most cases because it was possible to invest in an expensive, high-quality mech unit that did not take up much logistical capacity while still offering excellent battle performance.

Ves and Raymond continued to discuss the security and defense arrangements, though there wasn't much to talk about. All of the necessary decisions had been made before and Commander Magdalena could tell them a lot more about the readiness of their forces.

They also discussed the other changes that occurred.

Raymond passed on some bad news. "The fall of Sydney Superior ripped a hole in the Bright Republic's defensive lines. A large amount of star systems that aren't very important but also aren't negligible are under threat. Some of those star systems supplied valuable exotics and minerals to Bentheim. While the disruption so far has been slight, we're not sure if it will remain that way as the sandmen keep encroaching into Brighter territory."

"What does that mean to us in the short term and the long term?"

"Our profit margin will diminish as the supply of exotics and raw materials is impacted. Fortunately for us, your connections to the Tovar Family allows us to buy from their material suppliers. Only until the Tovars are starting to feel the pinch will they draw back on external commitments. Our analysts believe that price hikes are unavoidable in the near term and getting cut off from several important materials is a very real possibility in the long term."

At first, it sounded bad, but Raymond didn't appear very distressed.

"It could be worse."

Raymond concurred. "The LMC already enjoyed a good run on the eve of the next mech generation. We've surpassed a million total sales in the history of our mech company! Think of how impactful that is and how much money we've earned! It won't be a problem if the LMC ends production and tries to coast along for the next few decades!"

Of course, they would never do that. Ves had to keep designing and selling more mechs in order to advance his design philosophy.

He understood Raymond's point. They didn't have to be too remorseful if the economic circumstances worsened.

Ves definitely expected the economy to take a nosedive. Monthly inflation had already surpassed 30 percent in recent days while the price of many goods had shot up as they became less abundant.

"This only concerns our operations in the Bright Republic, right?"

"Don't think that the situation is better elsewhere. Many foreign third-party manufacturers have signalled an intention to stop producing the Soldier mechs because they're not economically viable anymore. In fact, our partners from the Reinald Republic and other hard-hit states have stopped communicating with us entirely. Perhaps they're still producing some Desolate Soldiers, but we can forget about receiving our fees."

"Even when the Reinald Republic is falling apart, its people still want to scam us one last time." Ves grimaced.

"It's not as if there will be any court left standing to prosecute them for their contract breaches."

In general, the economic outlook of the entire region worsened considerably more than Ves initially expected. The sandmen truly disrupted the regional supply chains more severely than many companies could cope.

Even the states that were safer such as those in the fourth line of defense weren't looking too good. Due to the interconnectedness of trade, the deterioration taking place in one state also impacted the economy of another state!

The consequence was that it was not very useful to shift production in the safer states such as the Independent State of Pillis which would be next if the sandmen managed to break the Bright Republic.

Both Ves and Raymond discussed the possibility of production stopping entirely in the coming half year or sooner.

Production would instead shift to producing only the most essential supplies and war materiel.

"I hope this production shift won't take place before I'm ready to publish my next commercial mech design." He muttered.

"When do you expect to unveil your new mech design?"

"Not too long. A month at most, maybe a little longer. We have to get it right at once since its mech concept is very radical and difficult to believe."

Though Ves and Gloriana directed most of their focus towards designing the Adonis Colossus, they still made sure to keep the Deliverer project alive.

The former project was already nearing the phase. Once they finished implementing the defensive augments on the Adonis Colossus design and made some other tweaks, Ves could hand off the optimization and prototype testing phases to his design team.

Of course that would also be the time when Ves had to prepare its design spirit, which was something he was still holding off due to the recent changes in direction.

"Compared to the custom mech project, the Deliverer project is much more important to our future and the future of our state." Raymond remarked. "Do you think it will work?"

"It has to. I know it sounds rather dubious, but don't discount it right away. The Ylvainans will definitely surprise us with their uncanny performance. They already managed to do so with my Transcendent Messengers and Holy Soldiers."

"I think you're giving them too much credit. The success of your work rests mainly in their sound design and fantastic glows. I have high expectations for the glow that comes with your Deliverer mechs. Is there really no way to make them compatible with Brighter mech pilots?"

Ves firmly shook his head. "Glows don't work the way you think they do. We settled on describing this phenomenon as a glow because it was the most neutral option available. If you think of it in different terms, such as a soul, then you'd understand why only Ylvainans can unleash the full potential of the Deliverer."

"I see..." Raymond answered skeptically.

Though the Larkinson elder possessed a good understanding of mechs and how to run a mech company, he was too new to understand the LMC's principles.

Like any Brighter, Raymond looked down on religion and superstition. In his perspective, the glows that had become the trademark of the LMC's products was simply some kind of unexplained metaphysical phenomena. Even though it was rather mysterious, everyone had grown rather used to them after witnessing so many mechs with the same properties.

"At least there is one upside to making the Deliverer exclusive to Ylvainans." Ves grinned. "I can jack up the price considerably without worrying about scaring away too many customers. My credibility with the Ylvainans is so high that they'll buy anything I produce."

Raymond frowned. "Take care not to break that trust. Many companies wish to have the relationship you've managed to forge with the Ylvainan people."

"It doesn't matter if the Ylvaine Protectorate falls due to failing to repel the sandmen. In fact, we don't even have to raise our prices of our Deliverer mechs. With how much cash we have, we can afford to subsidize the production of Deliverers if that is what it takes to get them in the hands of our customers as quickly as possible."

Ves was willing to do this because he believed that his Deliverers were to winning the Sand War!

Chapter 1653 Lasponge Module

"You're in doubt." Gloriana cleverly observed as they nearly completed the first iteration of the Adonis Colossus. "Do you have second thought on the defensive augments we've chosen?"

Ves wrapped his arm around Gloriana's taut waist and took in her presence. There was just something about her scent that made her even more alluring.

He never got tired of how she smelled. Every so often, she switched up her perfumes, giving his nose yet another delight that he inevitably associated with his girlfriend.

He had a sense that Gloriana was training him to adore her by keying him with her distinctive perfumes!

Was this one of the devious, underhanded ways that Hexer women kept their boys in line?

If so, Ves understood how effective the women had been in staying in charge!

"Hello?" Gloriana snapped her fingers in front of his eyes. "I'm speaking here!"

He quickly recovered. "Ah, sorry. I was just caught up in how lucky I am to be with you."

Gloriana's face bloomed with warmth. She partially melted in his embrace. "Aww. I love you too, Ves, but this isn't the time to get all lovey-dovey with each other. We're almost done with the initial version of the Adonis Colossus and I don't want anything marring our first proper custom mech!"

"Isn't the Resentful Soldier our first custom mech?"

She scowled. "That's not a proper custom mech! From my perspective, it's merely a variant that is heavily customized to accommodate a specific mech pilot. We were working against the constraints and design choices meant to serve the general public."

"And it's different this time?"

"Yup. Our Adonis Colossus is completely designed for Vincent Ricklin from the ground up. Its mech concept, its vision, the selection of component designs and the design choices we've made along the way are all geared towards designing the perfect vessel for Vincent or close to it. The fact that two Journeymen and a small design team spent over a month on this project is a considerable investment that is very extravagant service for any mech pilot! I normally charge several billion hex credits to design a custom mech from the ground up, you know!"

Ves widened his eyes!

Whereas most mech designers struggled to earn a few scraps, Gloriana could easily bag herself the equivalent of the price of a modern second-class corvette like the Barracuda!

Of course, Gloriana was a Journeyman with a reputation for designing custom mechs. Not every mech designer from the Hegemony received the same offers.

She earned a lot, and for good reason. Ves knew better than almost anyone how much her mother and her dynasty invested in her upbringing. If she wasn't competent in designing custom mechs, she would have never been able to run a business regardless of her background.

"Mechs designed this way can't be adapted into a commercial mech because they are too narrow in focus by their nature." She continued. "In mech design, if you want something done right, you have to do so right at the start."

He agreed. "Variants are most appropriate to design when you need to fulfill a similar but slightly different role."

"Anyway, back to the topic, do you have any questions about the Lasponge module?"

"Hmm.. not that much. I admit that it's an appropriate augment considering the likely battles our Adonis Colossus is about to face."

"It's just right for a man who loves himself more than anyone else." Gloriana affirmed.

Out of every possible defensive augment they could have picked, they went with something that offered temporary but supreme defense against lasers.

The so-called Lasponge module was a defensive system integrated in the frame of the mech. Ordinarily, it remained dormant, but when the mech received critical damage or upon the command of the mech pilot, the module activated, causing a lot of foam or liquid to pour out of special cavities in the frame.

This foam or liquid substance would quickly harden in seconds, forming a large shield-like obstacle that the mech could hide behind.

As its name suggested, the Lasponge shield absorbed laser beams and many other types of energy weapons like a sponge. It was extremely effective in shielding the mech behind it from a considerable amount of damage!

This sounded very great, but there was a reason why this wasn't a common defensive augment among mechs.

First, the Lasponge system spent money like running water. Every Lasponge substance had to be good enough to mitigate a substantial amount of laser fire, and that could not be obtained on the cheap.

For the Lasponge system that Ves and Gloriana selected for the Adonis Colossus, it cost as much as a single budget mech to replenish enough Lasponge substance to sustain a single activation!

Second, Lasponge was not as effective as genuine armor in withstanding enemy fire. It was formed out of foam or liquid that hardened in seconds, and this made it inherently more unstable.

Third, it took quite a lot of room to store the module and the containers necessary to store all of the Lasponge. The Adonis Colossus didn't have any room left once Ves and Gloriana integrated the system into the beefy mech.

While all of these disadvantages sounded bad, Ves thought it was worth it due to the importance of preserving Vincent's life.

It was an addition tailor-made for Vincent's inclinations and his importance to the Bright Republic. So what if using Lasponge was expensive? Vincent's life was much more valuable in comparison as long as he did what the government wanted!

Ves expressed his doubts. "From a technical standpoint, our mech design is functionally and mechanically sound. I doubt any mech designer would begrudge our design choices too much, at least if stylistic concerns are taken out of the picture. I'm quite proud of what we managed to accomplish. Mostly."

Indeed, the Adonis Colossus was a technical highpoint for them both within the category of third-class mechs.

While Gloriana ordinarily designed better machines, she was still able to bring out much of her expertise in this project.

On the other hand, Ves had never designed something so supreme, expensive and high-performing aside from his Transcendent Messengers, and even then those weren't truly custom mechs.

He witnessed plenty of excellent mechs, of course. Expert mechs such as Venerable Foster Belisarius or Venerable O'Callahan's Parallax Star made a very powerful impact on him in the past.

The custom mech that was most equivalent to the Adonis Colossus was Lord Javier's Loquacious Raphael.

Ves still remembered how the skilled Vesian noble and his excellent custom mech terrorized the Flagrant Vandals in Vesian space. The combination of an excellent mech pilot and an excellent custom mech achieved a result that was halfway towards the performance of an expert mech!

Sadly, he didn't expect too much from the Adonis Colossus.

The Loquacious Raphael and Transcendent Messengers were hero mechs which offered a great balance between speed, firepower and protection. Their combination of armaments allowed for a lot of skill expression, which was great for their elite mech pilots who possessed the sheer talent and ability to make the most out of their machines.

Vincent on the other hand was clearly a mediocre mech pilot who wasn't really passionate about his profession. His sloppy, inconsistent training forced Ves and Gloriana to dumb down much of the functions of the Adonis Colossus in order to avoid overwhelming its intended mech pilot!

Still, no matter what, Ves and Gloriana eventually managed to design the Adonis Colossus in a way that fit its mech pilot, and that was what mattered in the end. Vincent Ricklin would never be able to pilot a better machine at this point of time than their work!

"Since the problem you have isn't technical in nature, it's the divine aspect, right?" Gloriana eventually figured out.

Ves reluctantly nodded. "We've come close to the point where we ought to infuse our design with a spiritual component. I'm just unsure of whether it is the right choice."

"You're very decisive normally. Almost all of your prior mech designs are the results of predetermined planning. It's not normal for you to change your mind or be unsure of what you want your mech to be like in the end. Am I correct?"

He nodded.

Gloriana smiled and patted his head, ruffling his dark hair for a moment. "You're so cute, Ves. What you are just experiencing is what many other mech designers are forced to grapple with as well. Even Masters aren't so hung up on their predetermined plans. Sometimes, the vision we created at the start can't keep up with newly-introduced variables or discoveries. The more advanced the mech, the greater the room for doubt."

"I.. see. You have a point. It's just that uncertainty is normally very bad for my design philosophy. The only reason I've managed to hang on up to now is because my doubts are very narrow."

"Care to share, Ves?"

"You have probably guessed what I'm concerned about. It's the nature of the design spirit that I'm doubtful of. I have held off on creating it up until now but I can't stall the decision any longer."

He brought out a container and opened it up, revealing a P-stone that already contained a spiritual fragment of Nyxie which he carved out a few months ago.

Perhaps due to storing it for so long, the fragment felt unduly subdued. It hardly reacted to his proximity as if it was still asleep.

That wouldn't last once Ves processed it so that he could create his third spiritual product.

Gloriana glanced at the P-stone with fascination. Though her spiritual senses weren't as acute as his, she spent long enough in his presence to exercise her senses and judgment.

"Is it about the masculinity issue? I thought we already settled it, remember?"

He sighed. "I know. I don't regret the design choices we've made. It's just that I'm trying to figure out how to execute our decisions."

"It's simple, right? You just do your magic and create a proto-god that matches the divine nature of the mech and voila! We have a complete custom mech!"

"It's that matching that is the problem, Gloriana. Don't forget that we each imposed our own views of Vincent's masculinity onto our mech design. However, creating its design spirit is something that only I can do. If I create it as normal, then the spiritual product only inherits my view of masculinity. If I instill it as the design spirit of the Adonis Colossus, then it will slant more towards one aspect of masculinity while neglecting the other aspect that comes from you. That will unbalance the entire glow of the mech and lead to potentially disastrous results!"

In the worst case, the X-Factor of his Adonis Colossus would be in such an awful state that Ves would be forced to wipe it out entirely!

It was extremely difficult for him to correct a mistake made during the design process. The only way to salvage a mech design after that point was to employ the spiritual equivalent of an eraser to strip out the malfunctioning spiritual component of his design.

That basically meant that much of his work concerning his specialty would have gone to waste, which was a huge shame!

"What do you need to do to address this problem?"

"I have to find a way to integrate your view on Vincent's masculinity during the creation process. The spiritual product has to be a joint effort of both you and me, and I'm not sure how to do that. The only idea I have is..."

"Just tell me, Ves."

He sighed. "The most direct way to accomplish my goal is if I enter your mind and draw out your thoughts on Vincent and our design project and integrate them into our spiritual product during its formation. This is extremely dangerous and I've never really attempted this before. The entire reason why I'm so reluctant is that in the worse case, you might end up like Silent William or worse..."

Silent William's example clearly showed how perilous it was to tinker with spirituality inside someone's head!

Nonetheless, Gloriana did not look concerned at all. She continued to face him with a loving expression.

"I trust you, Ves. I'm not afraid of what you need to do to turn the Adonis Colossus into a success!"

Chapter 1654 Joint Creation

Ves knew Gloriana well enough to know that she would often be inclined to accept his suggestions.

Naturally, the only exception was when it came to her design philosophy or her core Hexer beliefs.

Aside from that, whenever he proposed something risky or radical, Gloriana often went along, trusting Ves to do what was best.

Ves liked being trusted for once. It was such a rare concept for him that he treasured every moment where he gave and received unconditional trust.

To be honest, Ves sometimes abused her easy acquiescence to his advantage. He managed to get her to agree to go on a grand expedition and persuaded her into providing him with a workable sample of pure ASMAS.

The suggestion that he presented to her just now was just as controversial. He couldn't stand letting Gloriana participate in this risky venture without understanding the risks and dangers associated with it. Not this time!

"Do you understand what this means? Since you can't do this on your own, I'll have to manually enter your head, extract your energy and some thoughts regarding Vincent and the Adonis Colossus, all the while preventing your self-defense mechanisms from stopping my intrusion."

"Self-defense mechanisms?"

"The.. thing that empowers your design philosophy is the same thing that guards your mind. I'm not sure how much control you have over it, but you have to restrain it from attacking me while I'm in your head."

"I'll try." Gloriana simply said.

"Think of what I'm doing. I'm proposing to enter your head and rummaging through your mind."

"I don't mind." She responded with a smile. "I don't have any secrets towards you. Besides, it's for a good cause, right? I really want the Adonis Colossus to be the culmination of our joint design efforts. If a better option is available, I don't want to ignore it because I'm too afraid to do what it takes to elevate our mech design."

"I've never done this, though. Who knows whether taking some of your thoughts and other stuff in your mind will damage your mentality."

Ves was still too inexperienced in messing with people's minds.

For some reason, his thoughts wandered back to his mother. She appeared to be a lot more adept in this kind of spiritual manipulation than him. Sometimes, he even feared that she even tinkered with his head, changing him in some way that suited her purposes better!

Of course, that was just his paranoia speaking. A real mother wouldn't harm her son, would she?

He shook his head to get rid of this useless tangent.

Fortunately, Gloriana took the time to consider the matter seriously.

"If you think this is the best course of action to make our mech design great, then go ahead. I want to do everything possible to make our work a mech to be remembered. How can we do that when we are too scared to do what is necessary?"

"I wouldn't say it's necessary. The Adonis Colossus would still be a mech that is good enough to fulfill our commission."

"That's never the proper attitude to adopt!" Gloriana snapped at him. "We should always endeavor to make our mech designs as perfect as possible! I will never settle for 'good enough' if a better solution is available! Now stop dilly-dallying around and proceed with your plan!"

"This.. requires some preparation. We also have to go somewhere quiet."

The two entered and an enclosed portion of the design lab. After a bit of consideration, Ves decided to hold the procedure inside the testing chamber where he used to experiment on William Urbesh.

This was because Melody and the guards of the Glory Battalion simply refused to let Ves alone with Gloriana without supervision.

No matter what excuses he brought up, they still wanted to keep an eye on Gloriana and him. So for lack of a better option, Ves decided that they could watch from the observation room while jamming every sensor and observation device.

Luckily, all of his spiritual procedures were invisible to the naked eye. Gloriana's assistant and guards would never be able to observe what was going. They would simply see Gloriana and Ves sitting opposite to each other while doing nothing.

The same applied to Gloriana as well. As far as he knew, her spiritual senses were extremely weak and she never developed an ability akin to his spiritual vision.

This would make it a bit harder to work with her in the creation of his fourth spiritual product.

His first spiritual product was Vescas, the design spirit of the Kinslayer.

His second spiritual product was the Solemn Guardian, the design spirit of the Desolate Soldier and its variants.

Now, he was about to create a new spiritual entity for the third time.

He already made ample preparations beforehand. He refined and cut down the chaotic, alien elements from the spiritual fragment he harvested from Nyxie long ago.

He also formed various images in his mind that corresponded to the Adonis Colossus' spiritual foundation. This not only ensured a seamless fit, but also shaped the glow of his mech design in the right fashion.

The Adonis Colossus was a mech designed to affirm Vincent's sense of masculinity.

Whether his sense of masculinity warped or not didn't matter. As long as the client was happy with the product, these issues didn't concern Ves very much.

"The important thing is to stay calm and suppress your mental defenses as much as possible." Ves cautioned yet again. "I can't stress the importance of this. The operation that I'm about to do in your mind is very delicate."

"My mind is under my control. I won't allow myself to disturb you in anyway. This is my promise."

"That's good. Strong conviction is vital in allowing everything to go according to plan. What we are about to do is an act of creation. The spiritual product that we are about to create is just as alive as any child born out of our union."

Her words instantly excited her. "A child?! It's too soon!"

"Calm down, Gloriana!" Ves panicked a bit. "It's just a metaphor! It's not truly human or a real child! It's just a living spiritual component to be added to our mech design."

"Still, I feel kind of hot." She blushed all of a sudden. "Should we move this to a bedroom?"

Ves palmed his face. "Don't joke around. If a spiritual product is our child, then it's not the first one. We've already created various mech designs together. Do you consider them all to be our children as well?"

She offered him a brilliant smile. "In a way, yes! Each time we create something together is something worth celebrating about! Of course, I don't consider our joint creations to be our literal children, otherwise we'd be limited to just six creations."

He ignored the implications of her words and began to proceed with the operation. A sense of solemnness overcame him as he rid himself of all distractions and concentrated his mind. A very powerful spiritual sensation emanated from his mind.

Though weak and self-contained, Gloriana clearly felt the difference at this proximity.

"Concentrate your mind and bring it under your control."

She tried to follow his instruction. She sat straighter and began to concentrate. Due to working alongside Ves for some time, she had plenty of practice of doing so. It only took her ten or so seconds to achieve a focused state.

Though not as pure as his own, Ves deemed her state to be satisfactory. He picked up the P-stone and held it in front of him. It held the main ingredient for their third act of creation.

For a serious mech design, Ves would have usually tried to borrow the spiritual fragment of an expert pilot to make his spiritual product more compatible to mechs.

However, Ves did not do so this time. It was far too much trouble to track an expert pilot down and find some way to borrow a spiritual fragment, especially during these hectic times!

The Adonis Colossus was a ranged hybrid mech that wasn't quite a rifleman mech. It would not be easy to find an expert pilot who specialized in these kinds of mechs.

Of course, the main rationalization for skipping this step was because the benefits wouldn't be of much use to Vincent anyway.

Since he was quite familiar with creating spiritual products by now, he proceeded with the steps without much fanfare. He smashed Nyxie's spiritual fragment until it fractured into shards of condensed spiritual energy!

He moved quickly, then. He employed his Spirituality and disgorged a lot of images and energy stored in his mind. They mixed in with the shards of the broken spiritual fragment without blending together.

Ordinarily, Ves would have tried to massage and piece the ingredients into a new and greater whole, but he had to add another batch of ingredients first!

"It's time." He whispered. "Open your mind to me. I'd like to enter it without forcing my way in. Can you do that?"

Gloriana briefly frowned. "How do I do that?"

"Use your imagination. Imagine your mind as an intangible field that is shaped like a bubble in your head. Imagine forming a partition in this bubble to allow me inside."

Fortunately, this step went a lot easier than he thought. Perhaps because she had done it before, her mind granted him an opening as soon as he extended a spiritual projection.

He entered her mind for the second time.

Just like before, her brilliant and active mind was a spiritual sight to behold. Her mind and spirit was so indescribable that Ves had to force himself to hurry up and proceed with his task.

Now that he broke Nyxie's spiritual fragment, he only had a limited amount of time to add extra ingredients to the mix!

Upon his exploration of her mind, he quickly stumbled upon his dormant spiritual fragment. He couldn't help but pause his search a bit to examine its state.

Compared to the lively spiritual projection of before, it had automatically collapsed in on itself after Gloriana's design seed cut off his direct connection. Even now, the spiritual fragment from his own spiritual energy didn't seem to be entirely in his control anymore.

Had it been contaminated by Gloriana's design seed?

The placement of the fragment was also very odd. It orbited close to her design seed as if it was a planet revolving around a sun.

Ves repressed the urge to take back what was originally his. He had no idea what was going on, but he intuitively sensed that it wasn't necessarily bad for him. Letting the fragment stay in her mind for her to enjoy might even lead to something good.

For now, he returned to his mission and began to scour her mindscape for thoughts related to the Adonis Colossus.

Perhaps because of the circumstances or because she spent such a long time on the design project, Ves immediately identified large amounts of relevant thought matter, for lack of a better word.

This was the most dangerous part. As Ves extended his spiritual projection, he attempted to harvest a portion of thought matter.

Take too much, and Ves might warp Gloriana's perception of their work or damage her mind.

Take too little, and his spiritual product would end up unbalanced.

He had to take just enough thought matter, and that was very difficult for Ves to judge.

Eventually, he hijacked a substantial portion of thoughts, enough to affect Gloriana's mind, and not in a good way!

Her mind immediately shuddered and her design seed began to spike with activity!

"Bear with it, Gloriana! I'm almost done! Stay calm!"

Her face scrunched with pain as she felt as if her mind had been wounded! Her instincts compelled her to firm up her mental defenses and lash out at the offending party, but she tried her best to keep herself under control.

Even though she knew she was hurt somehow, she needed to bear with the loss!

Chapter 1655 Assert Control

Searing pain and a profound sense of loss overtook Gloriana. If not for her strong determination to remain under control, she would have lashed out already!

As it was, she could barely hold herself together. It helped that she was familiar with her boyfriend's presence. Having taken in the profile of his presence made it a little bit easier to refrain from doing something that would ruin the procedure.

In the meantime, Ves cautiously withdrew his active spiritual projection through the hole that Gloriana still kept open. Now that he had his prize in hand, he had no desire to linger in her mind any longer.

Despite his spiritual prowess, Gloriana was a Journeyman who was just as strong as him! As long as her design seed roused into action, a mere spiritual projection would never be able to resist!

His gradual withdrawal from her mind proceeded without incident. The awful consequences that he imagined never came to pass.

"Success! You can relax now. I can complete the last steps on my own!"

She visibly slumped and nursed her head as she tried to make sense of what had happened.

Meanwhile, Ves steered his spiritual projection to the P-stone which still held the broken shards of Nyxie's spiritual fragments and the images and energy he already deposited.

Compared to his own contribution, Gloriana's thoughts were relatively minor. Only a small amount of her spiritual energy had blended with the thoughts, giving them just enough substance for Ves to be able to handle them in this fashion.

Ves wasn't too worried at the lack of quantity. From what he discovered about spiritual manipulation, it would be enough to harvest some of Gloriana's thoughts. The abundant spiritual energy he supplied would mostly be used to glue to the broken shards and scattered ingredients together.

He proceeded with the act of spiritual restoration.

This had always been a mystifying process to him. How could it be so easy to fit different spiritual shards and elements together using his own spirituality as glue? Was this normal, or was he the only one who could do this due to his unique design philosophy?

Whatever the case, Ves soon became immersed in the profoundness of what he was doing.

Ever since he muddled-headedly created Vescas and the Solemn Guardian, he resolved to pay more attention to the mechanics behind spiritual restoration.

He couldn't keep creating spiritual products without truly understanding the process. The engineer inside him recoiled at remaining as ignorant as a barbarian staring at a campfire while remaining ignorant of what was truly taking place!

He paid extra attention to why certain spiritual shards fit with other shards or other ingredients such as his images or Gloriana's thoughts.

Unfortunately, he saw no rhyme or reason why they inexplicably fit. Either his spiritual senses were too insensitive to detect what was going on, or some kind of invisible rule was in effect which he hadn't figured out at the moment.

He was inclined towards the latter possibility, which only made him feel more stupid.

"This is harder than I thought." He grumbled, though he made sure to maintain his concentration.

While Ves stared at the P-stone while he fiddled, Gloriana slowly regained her senses.

Anything that manipulated the mind resulted in major consequences. Even the act of depriving her with a portion of her thoughts on the Adonis Colossus severely altered her memory and perception of her current project!

Shock and alarm momentarily suffused her agitated mind. She felt violated in a way that struck her very being!

Though she had been warned by Ves of the danger of the operation, she had difficulty of accepting what had happened.

If anyone other than Ves or her closest family pulled this off on her, she would have torn into them like a wildcat!

As it was, seeing Ves consumed in his current task made her calm down. He hadn't hurt her on purpose. It had simply been necessary in order to achieve the result they wanted.

In order to design the perfect vessel, Gloriana already knew she had to make some sacrifices.

A few minutes passed by in silence as she recovered in a sense. While she hadn't regained what she lost, she at least sensed that her wound had been patched somehow.

Hopefully, the scars of what took place in her mind would fade. The lingering aftermath left her in an uncomfortable state.

In order to distract herself, she turned back to Ves and what he was doing.

Try as she might, she saw nothing special except Ves holding a rock.

She let out a frustrated grunt. She lacked the ability to perceive the wonders that Ves had described!

Even now, she sensed some unfathomable pressure emanating from the rock, yet that was far from detailed enough for her to get a sense of what was happening!

Maybe looking at it with her eyes was wrong. They clearly weren't working under these circumstances, so she simply closed her eyes and relied on her other senses to feel what was happening.

Without the distraction of visual clutter, she became a bit more sensitive to what was taking place. She leaned in a little, allowing her to sense some of the activity.

As she did, she slowly began to perceive the strength emanating from Ves. Though she was already familiar with it whenever they became immersed in their collaborative design sessions, she had never felt it as clearly as today!

His presence was different, foreign, masculine and conveyed entirely different principles of mechs than hers! Despite that, she basked in its comforting familiarity.

She focused on her boyfriend's presence and followed it down to what it was doing. At some point, Ves' presence began to mix with an entirely different presence.

Curious, Gloriana tried her best to perceive the activity better, but without much result.

Frustrated, she tried a little harder, scrunching her face furiously as she threw in whatever she could muster from her mind.

Eventually, something changed. She sensed something faintly familiar in the mixed presence.

Her own thoughts!

An aching sense of need welled within her depths. She wanted to take back her stolen thoughts and restore her original perception of the Adonis Colossus!

Before she knew it, her mind welled up as the core of her design philosophy acted on instinct!

Her sense of perfection grated at the loss of a piece of herself. She instinctively wanted to restore herself to completion, because she would be in a more perfect state than before!

Something powerful blasted through her mind and dove into the mix of presences!

"Ves! Help! I can't control myself!"

As Ves was halfway towards integrating the broken fragments and other elements together, he almost shocked himself out of his concentrated state as he perceived an outside intervention!

A foreign spiritual projection interrupted ongoing spiritual restoration effort!

Its flavor instantly clued Ves that it came from Gloriana, which negated some of his worries, but not all. The situation was very concerning as the spiritual projection acted chaotically in his unfinished project, knowing various spiritual elements aside as it rummaged through the mix as if it was drawing a prize!

His eyes widened as the tip of the projection bumped into one of Gloriana's borrowed thoughts. Upon contact, the projection instantly absorbed it, causing it to flow back to its original owner!

He was forced to retract some of his concentration, which weakened his spiritual manipulations.

"Gloriana! Control your impulses. Don't let your unconscious instincts act with impunity!"

Seeing that his words weren't helping her very much, he changed his phrasing.

"A God-in-waiting like you should never be a slave to your own powers! Are you a woman who is in supreme control over herself or a boy who lets his instinct run rampant? You can do better!"

The words he chose in haste managed to get through her skull like nothing else!

"I am a woman! I am better than a boy!" She exclaimed!

Her will, which had always been powerful, asserted itself over her uncontrollable impulses, bringing them to heel. While she wasn't powerful enough to retract her

spiritual projection, she at least managed to stop it from reabsorbing anymore of her thoughts.

That still left them in an awkward state.

"Can you pull back what you've extended?"

"I'm trying." Sweat trickled down from her brow. "It's.. difficult. As long as I can detect something that's part of me inside whatever you are doing, I can't pull it back."

Ves frowned. "I guess we have to proceed then. Once your thoughts are integrated in the spiritual product, your connection to them will be cut off. You'll still be able to sense them, I think, but they will no longer belong to you. Don't do anything else, please."

While he haltingly resumed his spiritual restoration operation, everything seemed to get back on track.

He still felt a bit annoyed at trying to work around Gloriana's frozen spiritual projection. It was as if he was trying to cook a meal with his Girlfriend sticking her arm inside the cooking pot during the entire process.

Of course, nothing harmed her spiritual projection. Temperature didn't seem to affect spirituality and none of the spiritual elements in place attacked it in any way.

However, the spiritual projection started to twitch and convulse. It behaved so oddly that Ves couldn't help but grow suspicious.

"Keep yourself still, please. You're disturbing my work.."

"Wait a moment, Ves. I have an idea."

While her eyes remained closed, a grin started to emerge on her face. Her spiritual projection convulsed even more until something changed!

It started to move again!

"What are you doing?!"

"Something good! Trust me! There are a lot of flaws here that need to be solved!"

To his amazement, Gloriana's spiritual projection no longer chased after her stolen thoughts. Instead, it began to meander around the unfinished spiritual product and engulfed the connections fusing different spiritual elements together.

Once her spiritual projection was done and moved away, Ves discovered that the fusion had grown less flawed!

Gloriana's spiritual projection had managed to improve the merger of different spiritual elements!

Before, when Ves glued different spiritual elements together, he was never fully in control of the process. He didn't even understand what went on. All he could do was pretend that the spiritual elements possessed some magnetized surfaces and see if something stuck on those points.

Even if he found a match, the glued portion was still tentative and not entirely as good as he wanted it to be. His first spiritual product especially felt as if it was a spiritual Frankenstein due to how poorly its elements fit together.

So far, Ves only managed to mitigate this problem by processing and priming the ingredients beforehand. By reducing their inherent contradictions, he hoped that the fusion of different elements became a little more complete.

The Solemn Guardian turned out to be a lot more integrated as a consequence, which meant that he succeeded in heading in the right direction.

Yet even then, the Solemn Guardian still possessed quite a lot of flaws to this day, which made it weaker than natural-born spiritual entities.

This time was different! With Gloriana's spiritual projection working to address the flaws in the procedures that Ves was performing, the spiritual product became less and less flawed.

Ves saw the potential in what was taking place.

"Whatever you are doing, keep it up. Are you exhausted or in pain in any way?"

She shook her head. "Not anymore. I think I got my instincts to agree that it would be better to fix the flaws I'm sensing than to chase after the stuff that belongs to me. It's getting easier and easier to control myself."

"Then.. let's continue. I'm curious what will happen once we finish."

They silently concentrated on their tasks and resumed their work. Their intense focus and their close proximity somehow brought them closer than ever before.

In particular, their spiritual projections began to interact with each other. Their close proximity and their intense familiarity with each other's presence led to a very vague reaction that caused them to draw together for some reason.

As they grew more excited, Ves faintly suspected that something exceptional was taking place.

It felt as if he was resonating with Gloriana!

Chapter 1656 Artificial Conception

Since returning home, Ves and Gloriana already collaborated on more than half-a-dozen different mech designs.

Sure, the majority of the designs consisted of variants of the Desolate Soldier, but they still provided months worth of collaboration experience.

Each time they worked together, they constantly tried to complement each other's design styles and achieve greater synergy.

Right now, Ves never expected Gloriana to be able to employ her specialty in this fashion!

The process of spiritual restoration had always been extremely abstruse, and Ves only managed to achieve it because he could sense and observe what was taking place!

Gloriana on the other hand lacked these advantages!

She wasn't even fully in control of her own spirituality. Her mind only accidentally extended a spiritual projection because it wanted to retrieve what it lost.

"How much control do you have over what you are doing?" Ves asked.

His concentration ability was sufficient enough to keep focusing on his task with some attention left to spare.

On the other hand, Gloriana could barely keep up what she was doing. Ves had to repeat his question another time to get an answer.

"I'm not.. sure. Whatever I'm doing is straining me! I don't think I can keep this up for long!"

"Don't worry about anything else, then. Just maintain what you are doing until you can't take it any longer. What you're doing is very helpful for our eventual end product. Don't harm yourself on my account, though! We can always do better next time!"

"Got it! I don't think I'm harming myself, though. I'm just getting more and more exhausted."

Ves worried about her condition a little. He knew that she often pushed herself because she put very high demands on herself. Ordinarily, she was smart enough to know her limits, but the problem was that she possessed almost no experience with spiritual manipulation.

He extended another part of his concentration to monitoring her condition. As long as her mind or spirituality could no longer hold it, Ves would immediately pull her out.

Of course, for the moment Ves needed to make the most out of this accidental situation.

After another minute of forming his spiritual product, Ves gained a better idea on what Gloriana was doing.

Ves manipulated his spiritual projection like his arm with purposeful direction. His spiritual perception allowed him to see exactly what he was doing, even if he didn't know the mechanics behind what was taking place.

In contrast, Gloriana's spiritual projection largely moved by itself. Instead of acting like a controlled extension of herself, it behaved more like an autonomous bot that performed actions that corresponded with its primary programming.

Right now, Gloriana managed to exert enough control to switch the priority of her spiritual projection's programming.

It stopped trying to retrieve her missing thought matter in favor of correcting whatever flaws it sensed in the vicinity.

Gloriana managed to come up with a clever way of stopping her spiritual projection from wreaking havoc in their current operation!

Now that her spiritual projection switched from doing damage to contributing materially to the formation of the spiritual product, the operation went smoother than ever before!

What was even more remarkable was that they didn't solely act in isolation.

The close proximity of their spiritual extensions led to some strange phenomena.

Chief among them was the result of their intimate familiarity with each other's presence and design philosophies.

All of their prior collaborations finally bore some fruit in this instance as their spiritual projections started to grow closer to each other!

Ves felt a strange sense of longing from his design philosophy. While he could have suppressed his intuition that compelled his spiritual projection to converge with Gloriana's, he did not do so because he was curious.

He trusted in his intuition!

As they grew closer, the spiritual projections grew more excited as their familiarity with each other deepened. The excitement had reached such a high level that they vibrated in harmony!

"Resonance!" He whispered with gleaming eyes.

Resonance appeared to be a recurring phenomenon with spirituality. Anytime spirituality or spiritual energy resonated, something good always took place!

Ves never expected Ves to resonate with Gloriana during the creation of a spiritual product!

He compared the actions of his own spiritual projection with that of his girlfriend.

The difference was clear.

In Gloriana's parlance, his domain centered around life, or at some aspect of it. This shaped his spirituality in ways that granted him some superpowers as Ketis once described.

Ves took advantage of this property by performing spiritual techniques such as spiritual restoration, which was essentially a way of resurrecting a dead spiritual entity by infusing it with his own life-attributed spiritual energy.

If Ves had adopted a different design philosophy, then he guessed that he would never have been able to perform this wondrous feat.

Nonetheless, life was inherently chaotic and unpredictable.

It normally took hundreds, thousands if not millions of generations to allow for nature to filter out the most flawed and unfit to survive the circumstances.

Such a lengthy process of selection and optimization was simply unthinkable to Ves. Perhaps he might have the patience to let nature take its course if he was an actual god, but he was just a mech designer!

While Ves was able to fuse compatible spiritual shards and elements together with the help of his specialty, the mergers were far from ideal in his eyes.

The two spiritual products he created before all ended up flawed and less than what they could have been. This had always been regretful to him. It was like birthing a child who was mentally handicapped or possessed a third arm.

Though most of the flaws would eventually heal or diminish when the spiritual product matured, they would always limit its potential.

Therefore, the importance of fixing these flaws straight away so that he could birth a much healthier spiritual product became evident.

"A child conceived by two people is better than one conceived alone!"

Though the situation right now was not equivalent to human conception, Ves found it to be a nice way of interpreting the ongoing process.

Just as a child was supposed to inherit the traits of both parents, the spiritual product being formed received the care of two different mech designers.

Ves provided the spark of life, while Gloriana addressed some of the flaws that he left behind.

This was akin to artificial conception.

Most couples with money to spare would always go to a clinic to conceive a designer baby.

Instead of letting nature and chance select the genes of the baby, a geneticist or other specialist manipulated the genes of the unborn child to achieve a better result.

As far as Ves knew, this service was fairly prevalent in the upper echelons of third-rate states. It was even better and more ubiquitous in more advanced states.

This disparity in genes always put second-class citizens ahead of third-class citizens. Although some abnormal people were occasionally born among the latter, they were far too rare.

Now that Gloriana contributed her strength to the process, it was the same as upgrading his spiritual product from a baseline human baby into a genetically-enhanced baby!

The complementary nature of their collaboration was not limited to this! Due to the resonance that had taken hold, something profound had descended upon their ongoing creation and affected its nature!

Ves observed the changes very closely and found out that some of the inherent attributes of the broken shards of Nyxie's spiritual fragment underwent transformation!

Yes, transformation!

Although it was very weak and only affected a small portion of spiritual attributes, this was an exceptional effect!

The only other way that Ves could change the spiritual attribute of something was to employ spiritual contamination!

Obviously, such methods were very inconvenient because Ves had to rely on an external source to contaminate something else, changing far more than he wanted.

This was how William Urbesh became so weird and silent!

If Ves could employ a means of transforming spiritual attributes in a very focused and targeted manner, then he could drastically limit the side effects of any transformation attempt!

"This is true synergy!"

Gloriana seemed to be aware of the preciousness of the moment. Though she was nearing the end of her endurance, she continued to persist in her efforts. The main reason why she wanted to extend her exhausting efforts was because she wanted to study and enjoy the resonance they achieved!

As long as they could reproduce this effect under other circumstances, their collaboration would truly reach a greater height!

A phenomenon like this was not something that could be achieved through ordinary collaboration!

Eventually, she couldn't hold out anymore. Her spiritual projection visibly weakened to a point where she was no longer able to match his spiritual projection's strength.

The resonance effect disappeared and the strange form of synergy that transformed some of the spiritual product's attributes had gone away as a result.

Disappointment welled in them both. Though Gloriana only merely missed the chance of becoming more familiar with the exceptional form of synergy they achieved, Ves lamented the premature end of the transformation and error-correcting processes.

The transformation process changed only a fraction of the original spiritual attributes. However, the importance of this effect couldn't be overstated!

That was because Ves discovered that some of Nyxie's original alien attributes had transformed into attributes that corresponded to the common vision that Ves and Gloriana maintained while they concentrated!

The spiritual product leaned a bit more towards masculinity, which was very welcome news to Ves! Transforming pollution into something pure had always been one of his thorniest problems!

The fact that they managed to transform attributes that originally belonged to a very powerful spiritual entity was even more exceptional!

If Ves and Gloriana employed the same synergistic effect on something weaker, their refinement attempt would definitely achieve greater results!

As for the error-correcting process, Gloriana managed to fix or improve over half of the flaws that Ves had left behind after he was done fusing spiritual elements together.

Though not all of the flaws had been addressed as well as he hoped for, just the fact that it was possible to correct them gave him a lot of hope for the future!

"Withdraw. You're at the end of the rope. Don't break yourself. You've done enough."

His words broke her concentration, causing her to collapse on the deck of the testing chamber. She breathed deeply and nursed her head as if she was suffering from an enormous headache.

Ves couldn't spare the time to attend to her as he was rapidly trying to wrap up the spiritual restoration process. Enough time had passed for him to fuse the remaining elements and cause the new spiritual amalgamation to come to life as a new spiritual product!

A celebratory pulse emerged out of the spiritual product that was considerably more pronounced than Ves had ever sensed before!

Luckily, the pulse hadn't radiated very far. At most, only the entire floor felt its birth.

As Ves slowly wound himself down, he studied the newborn spiritual product that was locked inside the P-stone.

He felt a strong sense of masculinity from the spiritual product. Not just that, but the masculinity was tinged with both immaturity and false bravado in a roughly equal proportion!

"Success!" Ves announced with a grin. "We've succeeded! Not only that, but we achieved more than we set out to make!"

Ves moved over to his exhausted girlfriend and carefully placed the P-stone in her hands.

The direct contact enlivened her for a moment as she sensed something akin to a glow but much more lively from the rock!

"It's a boy!"

"Uhhh..!"

"How about calling him Bravo?" Gloriana weakly smiled.

Though Ves didn't like this simple name, he acquiesced considering Gloriana's fragile state.

"Sure.. let's call him Bravo. We'll make sure to take care of him! Rest now. I'll take care of the rest."

"Sure..."

Gloriana finally fell asleep.

Chapter 1657 True Miracle

Gloriana's inexplicable collapse and slumber alarmed her custodians. Melody and the guards of the Glory Battalion barged into the testing chamber and immediately took their charge away.

If she hadn't sent a secret signal, the Glory Battalion might have treated him as an enemy!

Fortunately, their initial examinations did not reveal anything wrong with her body. She was just exhausted for some reason. Her brain activity had diminished considerably to the point where she wasn't able to stay awake.

"She'll probably recover after a good night of sleep and some special treatment." Melody concluded after she analyzed the readings from her multiscanner. She threw a scornful look at Ves. "What in the galaxy were the two of you doing here? What is so special about this rock?"

In their distraction, Ves had already picked up the P-stone and returned it into its container. He would never allow the Hexers to 'confiscate' this vital object!

"It's a trade secret." Ves bluntly replied. "Ask Gloriana if you really want to know."

"Oh, I'll definitely do that, Brighter. If she doesn't wake in a day, I'll come back to you again. I hope you'll be more forthcoming at that time." Melody spat.

Melody and the guards quickly moved Gloriana away on a deployable floating stretcher. Right now, they were far more concerned about Gloriana's health than figuring out the reasons for her inexplicable collapse.

"Please wake up soon." Ves whispered.

He did not wish to deal with angry Hexers. They would definitely fault him for putting her in a bad condition!

If Gloriana's slumbered longer than a day, then Ves might have to go on a spiritual excursion in order to check her condition!

"That's for later." He shook his head.

He wrapped everything up and left the testing chamber. He checked up on his design team to make sure they were performing their assigned tasks. After that, he entered one of the private offices next to the design lab.

While he wasn't as exhausted as Gloriana, he expended plenty of spiritual energy. In order to recover, he absorbed some excess spiritual energy from another P-stone.

He finally returned to a semblance of normalcy after topping off his spent reserves.

"Let's see what result we've achieved!"

The exceptional circumstances earlier augmented the original spiritual restoration process in two different ways.

Gloriana's native ability to detect and correct some flaws was already remarkable enough. The only flaw was that she didn't have any direct control over her spiritual projection, let alone perceive what was happening.

Unless she became more like him, she would never be able to exert the same level of control as him. This meant that she could only use her power in this manner with his assistance.

Now that he had some time to reflect, he wondered whether they could replicate what happened earlier. Though the strange developments only happened through sheer accident, Ves was confident they could repeat the process.

"The key is stealing something from her mind. As long as I dangle her stolen thoughts in front of her as bait, she will definitely be compelled to fix the flaws in her mind by taking back what she lost!"

This was a rather crude and tasteless method to Ves. The biggest problem concerning this method was that he risked damaging Gloriana's mind each time she harvested a piece of her thoughts.

Ves instinctively felt that this action wasn't trivial. All of her thoughts were infused with a bit of her spiritual energy. Losing that energy probably impacted her mental condition.

If something like that happened to Ves, he would have shrugged it off. His many spiritual shenanigans had already increased the resilience of his mind and Spirituality. He could take a considerable amount of abuse!

This was not the case for other mech designers! Ordinarily, they never employed their spirituality in such a direct manner. Even a minor change in Gloriana's mind and spirituality would probably come across as a major shock to her equilibrium!

Ves wasn't sure if what he did to her damaged her mind permanently. He would have to check up on her frequently in order to reassure himself that the damage wasn't lasting.

Even then, he should not employ this procedure too frequently. Her mind needed to fully heal in order to withstand another attack.

Perhaps exercising her mind in this fashion was not a bad idea. Just like Ves, repeated impacts to her mind would eventually stimulate her mind into fortifying its defenses and improve its resilience.

Of course, Ves needed to be careful and verify the changes in her condition. What he could do, Gloriana might not be able to. He couldn't afford to make any presumptuous assumptions.

He turned his attention back to the P-stone that carried his newborn spiritual product.

"Hello, Bravo."

In order to avoid contaminating Bravo, Ves made sure to avoid direct spiritual contact. He only observed Bravo passively using his spiritual vision.

"As expected, you're much more wholesome than your predecessors!"

His previous two spiritual products always felt a bit discordant and fractured shortly after their creation. The problem was particularly severe in the case of Vescas as the fusion of spiritual elements was very poor.

Vescas was like a fragile dining plate that Ves threw on the ground and hastily glued back together.

While Bravo started off the same, Gloriana's involvement vastly improved the repair process. Not only that, but she also dusted off some of the dirt and other grime that had accumulated on the broken shards!

The end result was a plate that looked much more cleaner and whole than before!

"Sadly, it's not enough." He shook his head in disappointed.

Gloriana's spiritual projection mainly acted with instincts and within the limitations of what it could do. Spiritual manipulation was never her strength, so her spiritual projection only fixed the most obvious flaws.

In the face of more complicated problems, her spiritual projection could only give it up.

Aside from this, Gloriana also withdrew her spiritual projection prematurely without finishing the entire process. Plenty of unaddressed imperfections remained which Ves wasn't able to fix despite seeing Gloriana at work.

Unlike her, Ves did not possess an intuitive and extraordinary understanding of flaws.

If there were 999 ways to botch the correction and only one way to do it right, then Ves would definitely fail 99,9 percent of the time!

As for Gloriana, even if she faced the same situation, her intuition and her design philosophy would definitely force the failure rate downwards to 20 percent or even less!

This was one of the exceptional advantages of Gloriana, and she developed this intuitive understanding through both talent and a lot of effort!

Ves had learned a lot from the events that took place today.

At the very least, discovering a fourth form of synergy which he tentatively called Artificial Conception was enough to drive him wild!

It was the only form of synergy so far that explicitly involved resonance between him and his girlfriend!

Now that they resonated once, Ves believed that it wouldn't be so impossible to resonate again!

"Something like this should definitely be easier to accomplish with practice!"

Though the difference it made in Bravo wasn't too drastic, Ves believed this was only the start.

In the future, he might be able to have the resonance ability to transform spiritual attributes to clean up Nyxie's spiritual fragment and reduce its pollution.

Ves believed that hardly any other entity in the galaxy could achieve what he and Gloriana had inadvertently accomplished!

"This is a true miracle!"

It was as if their combined efforts actually accomplished the impossible feat of lying to reality!

He knew how difficult it was to change the nature of a spiritual attribute. It was akin to transmuting lead to gold. Without sufficiently advanced magic or technology, he could forget about performing something that bent reality so drastically!

While it was possible to achieve similar results through spiritual contamination, artificial conception was much more cleaner!

Ves inspected Bravo over and over again, paying special attention to its attributes. Nothing suggested that its pollution level, defined as the proportion of undesirable attributes, had increased.

"This is extremely precious!"

He always desired the ability to transform spiritual attributes.

From his observations and manipulations of mech pilots, he knew that changing their spiritual attributes was the key to facilitating their advancement into expert candidates or expert pilots!

Naturally, this only applied to potentates who already possessed spiritual potential. If a mech pilot did not possess any spirituality, there was nothing to transform.

The question was, could he use this ability to turn a mech pilot into an expert candidate immediately?

"There are too many uncertainties." He grimaced. "I also can't pull this ability off willy-nilly. At the very least, I need Gloriana's help."

The state of resonance they achieved hadn't come about instantly. It only appeared during a very important moment where the both of them concentrated on nearly the same ideas.

Such a state was very difficult to reproduce, especially if they weren't creating another spiritual product.

Even if they managed to perform this ability on command, it was not a given to transform an average potentate with spiritual potential into an expert candidate.

Ves noted that those who did so always seemed to adopt a single dominant value or principle.

Someone who was too muddle-headed would never be able to advance to expert candidate if they didn't possess any strong beliefs in something.

While this could be trained to an extent, Ves discovered that many people weren't actually good at focusing themselves to a single pursuit.

Humans were inherently complex and multifaceted. Someone as single-minded as Venerable Foster was the exception rather than the rule.

Ves believed that this was the main reason why most mech pilots with spiritual potential never found the catalyst that allowed them to break through. Their inclinations were too normal, dooming them to live out their lives as mortals.

"Perhaps it is not without a reason that expert pilots are called demigods." He muttered.

Each demigod was partly a god, and each god possessed at least one domain or sphere of power.

This was where his new ability came in. As long as he used this ability to transform much of a mech pilot's spiritual attributes into a specific form, he could forcefully make them single-minded enough to enable their breakthroughs!

Of course, such a drastic attempt at spiritual surgery would definitely alter his patient's personality. This meant that making another Silent William was definitely possible, though not as severe.

"I don't understand enough right now." He sighed. "I need more test subjects so I can experiment more."

He wasn't in a hurry to turn someone into expert candidates or expert pilots anyway. The Mech Corps would get their greedy hands on any mech pilot he uplifted, especially during these dire times.

Each additional expert pilot could save another planet from getting engulfed by the sandmen!

The only exception was Silent William himself. Now that the MTA announced the invasion of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy, getting closer to the Rim Guardians had become one of his main priorities.

He recalled the reports he read about his performance in recent battles.

"So far, William hasn't shown any signs of breaking through." He frowned.

If William showed no improvement by the time the first detachment of Avatars returned from the front, Ves might be willing to employ his new ability to operate on his spirituality again.

After all, he already messed with William once. He might as well do it again to make sure he achieved his intended result!

Just as Ves was about to muse further, an alert suddenly rang throughout the entire Mech Nursery!

When Ves emerged from his private office, Miles Tovar ran up to him in panic!

"Ves! It's an emergency! We have to run to safety!"

"Calm down! What is going on, Miles?"

"It's the sandmen!" The Apprentice replied breathlessly. "They've come to Cloudy Curtain!"

"What?!"

Chapter 1658 Stormy Clouds

A sandman fleet entered the Cloudy Curtain System!

This should have been impossible, or at least extremely unlikely!

After the fall of Sydney Superior, a part of the interior of the Bright Republic became vulnerable. Sandmen fleets were much more able to travel to Bentheim.

The port system already fended off a dozen different sandman incursions, and this was just the start.

While Cloudy Curtain was situated close to Bentheim, the latter was much more attention-grabbing to the sandmen.

Hardly any sandman ought to be interested in a trivial star system with an average sun and no exotic mineral deposits to speak of. It was one of the least attractive star systems in the Bentheim region with a human population.

"How strong is this fleet and where did it come from?" Ves demanded as he entered the command center of the Living Sentinels.

Commander Magdalena Larkinson, who sat in the command chair, answered his question.

"The sandman fleet we've discovered first emerged in Bentheim, sir. Unlike every other fleet that transitioned there, it resisted the incredible temptation to travel closer to the energy-rich planet in the inner system and transitioned back into FTL before the nearest defense force could reach its position."

"This is too abnormal! The sandman admirals never resist the temptation to absorb more energy!"

The Sand War lifted the veil that obscured the sandmen. Previously, many people only knew scant details about this alien race. Now that they became a threat, everyone began to know what they were like.

Perhaps in an attempt to raise everyone's confidence in winning the war, the Bright Republic revealed many details about the race.

As a whole, the sandman was more akin to a superorganism than a genuine civilization of sentients.

While the sandmen were able to process data like computers, they didn't have much of a personality.

As a result, they were more like nature's version of bots. Most sandmen were so simple and stupid that they didn't have the drive to do anything when isolated.

Only the presence of higher-caste sandmen changed the equation a little. Smarter and more capable of independent thought than their lower cousins, these sandmen were able to make their own decisions and command trillions of sandmen to follow their orders.

Naturally, this did not mean that a sandman admiral was just as smart as a human fleet commander. Time and time again, the sandman admirals had shown that they didn't have much imagination and usually followed their orders to the letter.

No sandman admiral should have the initiative to abandon a juicy target for a rotten target, especially several ones at the same time!

"How many sandman admirals are in this fleet?" He asked next.

"Three to five. The local defense fleet is more than capable of addressing this threat, sir."

Ves sighed in relief. While it would be a bit painful to fend them off by relying on the Avatars of Myth and Living Sentinels stationed at Cloudy Curtain, they weren't alone.

The Mech Corps stationed a small force in the star system. The Starfighter Corps also donated some starfighter wings to serve as cannon fodder.

The government also contracted some mercenary corps to bolster the defense. Along with the Cloud Whalers, the private outfits were more than capable of defeating half of the sandman fleet as long as they didn't cut and run.

"Don't expect too much from the starfighter wings." The Sentinel Commander warned. "There are only two of them here, and they all consist of castoffs."

Ves reached towards a nearby control panel and summoned up a page that displayed the readily available assets to meet the incoming threat.

As Magdalena had said, the starfighters patrolling in space all consisted of outdated, first generation models. Their flimsy armor succumbed far too quickly against the sandmen these days.

The sandman fleet that decided to invade Cloudy Curtain this time happened to have adopted the dreaded swarm configuration!

This meant that facing a storm of lasers was practically assured!

"The starfighter pilots will have to prepare themselves for the worst." He muttered.

"I'm not so certain of that, Ves. The Mech Corps has recently sent a notice to us. They plan to repel the sandmen without involving starfighters.

"What?!" Ves grew concerned. "That's ridiculous! Who will draw fire away from our mechs if the starfighters aren't there to act as bait?"

"Captain Xera Monlin believes that it isn't necessary to rely on a screen of starfighters. The starfighter wings will be placed in reserve to offer long-ranged fire support and provide additional assistance as needed."

"What about us, then?"

"We are expected to deploy our new Dawnbreakers in the forefront of the battleline. Together with the Novabreakers fielded by the 2nd Equinox Stingers, our mechs are expected to absorb most of the firepower, at least until the machines can't take it any longer."

Ves wanted to puke. What was the point of fielding cannon fodder if the officer in charge valued their lives too much?

However, considering how badly first generation starfighters performed against the swarm configuration, the mech captain's orders made a bit more sense.

Unlike the starfighters, the Dawnbreaker and Novabreaker models had been designed while the destructive potential of the sandmen came to light.

The armor systems of those mechs were anything but ordinary at a response. The mech already came with a considerable amount of damage mitigation properties to preserve the life of the mech pilot. Paired with a decent application of compressed armor, it took a lot of firepower to crack through their shells!

Even so, Ves was deeply reluctant to put his Dawnbreakers at risk. A sandman fleet led by at least three sandman admirals was a significant threat that could not be repelled without cost!

While the relative strength of the defense forces ensured that they would definitely win, the real question was what price they must pay to achieve victory.

Each Dawnbreaker was a premium mech. They cost as much as a Blackbeak and repairing their damaged armor plating was very costly.

"We don't have to worry too much about that." Magdalena noted. "The Mech Corps has already promised us to fund at least half of the cost of repairs. We'll also earn a lot more merit and appreciation from them if we follow orders."

Ves grunted in frustration. "You're in command of our Avatars and Sentinels right now. I'll defer to your judgement."

"In that case, I intend to follow instructions."

He expected her to do so. She used to serve in the Mech Corps, after all.

"Can you tell me why?"

"While it's a bit abnormal that the sandman admirals decided to divert to Cloudy Curtain, we can't assume that it's a one-time exception. Not a single star system in the Bright Republic is safe. We have to prepare for the worst, and that means that we need to make decisions in light of attrition warfare."

The sandmen loved attrition warfare. They didn't value their lives at all and were more than willing to sacrifice hundreds of sandman fleets to exhaust the defenders of a single star system!

"If that's the case, then we should sacrifice our least valuable assets first. I don't see how it benefits us more if we accrue considerable damage to our most powerful mechs. The starfighters are far less valuable! We ought to place them in the vanguard instead!"

"I understand where you are coming from, Ves, but... for now Captain Monlin wants us to sacrifice material assets rather than precious human lives. While the old generation starfighters don't pack the new Sandbreaker weapon system, their ballistic gun mounts still pack a considerable punch. Letting as much of them stay alive as possible will pay off in future battles."

A relatively unimportant star system as Cloudy Curtain didn't receive much attention from the Mech Corps and Starfighter Corps. It shouldn't have been a surprise that the Equinox Stingers wanted to keep up as many machines intact as possible.

"Will our forces intercept the sandmen, or let them approach this planet?"

The government already installed a loose belt of defensive platforms in geosynchronous orbit to the planet. The amount of firepower they could contribute was considerable, but the downside was that the sandmen would have already reached the final lap when they entered the range of the final defenses.

"Captain Monlin will never risk the population of Cloudy Curtain in an attempt to reduce the casualties suffered by the forces under her command. She has her orders. She must protect the lives of those who are stuck on Cloudy Curtain. She can't allow a single grain of animated sand to go through and make landfall!"

In the end, the Mech Corps got their wish. The entire base of the Silver Sentinels became a hive of activity. Though not every Sentinel was eager to fight, this was one instance where every able mech pilot had to step up and fight!

If the sandman fleet managed to bull through the defenders, the lives of billions of humans were at stake!

Any mech pilot who shirked their duty and avoided battle would immediately be dealt with by the military police after the battle had ended!

Light carriers landed directly in the base of the Sentinels and conveyed numerous Dawnbreakers, Desolate Soldiers, Aurora Titans and other spaceborn mechs into orbit.

Over a hundred grave-looking mech pilots boarded the vessels as well.

If Ves could gather all of his forces, he could easily field over three-hundred mechs at once. Sadly, he sent a portion of his Avatars and Sentinels to the front. He also dispatched his Battle Criers on some errands.

In truth, he could have committed even more defenders, but Ves did not wish to leave the Mech Nursery vulnerable. There were far too many assets there that still needed protection.

As Ves waited for his own ride, Commander Magdalena addressed one more topic before she accompanied her Sentinels into space.

"Can we depend on the Glory Battalion, sir?"

He immediately shook his head. "Don't get your hopes up. Their primary mission is to protect Gloriana's life. While we all know that the detachment assigned to accompany Gloriana is powerful enough to crush the aliens, the Glory Battalion will never fight for our sake."

Gloriana was still unconscious and would remain so for at least a day. As long as she was out cold, she would never be able to object to being taken away from Cloudy Curtain.

"That's a shame."

"This is why it's important to cultivate our own second-class mech mech force, commander. As long as we possess enough strength, we don't have to rely on others for help."

The two eventually parted. While Commander Magdalena planned to command the Avatars and Sentinels from one of their carriers, Ves decided to observe the battle aboard the Barracuda.

While Ves was tempted to accompany Magdalena more, he didn't want to get in the way. He wouldn't be able to contribute much anyway.

Moments later, he boarded the Barracuda with Nitaa, Crindon and Lucky. He was tempted to bring Gavin and Raymond as well, but they wouldn't be of any use in a battle.

"Welcome aboard the Barracuda, Mr. Larkinson." Captain Silvestra greeted his arrival.

"It's been some time since I last stepped on my ship." Ves remarked with a smile while he carried Lucky.

"Meow."

"Oh, shut up. If worse comes to worst, I won't have to order the Barracuda to descend back to the surface in order to pick you up!"

That was extremely unlikely unless the sandmen somehow mastered stealth technology.

The group headed to the bridge which immediately became a little crowded as it hadn't been designed to accommodate too many people.

"Crindon. Please assist in monitoring the communication channels. If there is anything going on behind our back, I want to know right away."

"Yes, sir."

As the Barracuda lifted off and ascended to the surface, Ves settled himself on a spare seat while observing the proceedings.

He already watched a lot of footage of battles against the sandman, but that was not enough!

If he truly wanted to understand the sandmen and how they changed in comparison to his previous personal encounters with them, then he needed to get closer to the action!

He needed to get close enough for his heart to pump like a war drum!

Chapter 1659 Spacer Life

Shortly after the defense force gathered together, the fleet flew out to meet the incoming sandmen.

All of the vessels in the fleet consisted of light carriers. Only the detachment of the Equinox Stingers possessed a speed-oriented combat carrier.

Ves looked enviously at the projection of the combat carrier. Though he wasn't a shipwright, his vast technical competence and his prior experience in traveling aboard ships gave him a very good appreciation of combat carriers.

"She's a beauty." Captain Silvestra whistled as she walked up to him. "Ships like these are built with enough exotics and materials to produce at least ten standard mech companies. Some combat carriers are even more expensive than expert mechs!"

She was right. Due to the large variety of combat carrier classes, their costs varied very widely. However, even the cheapest ones cost as much as a hundred Blackbeaks!

Ves understood the horror of their value very well. He remembered the losses the Flagrant Vandals had suffered. Not only did they lose hundreds of mechs, but also several highly valuable combat carriers and other vessels.

However, even more grievous was the loss in trained and loyal soldiers.

While the Flagrant Vandals appeared to suffer from money problems, with a backer like Flashlight, they probably would have been able to scrounge up the money to rebuild their lost assets.

However, trained mech pilots, engineers, ship captains, medical doctors and other highly valuable personnel were not so easy to accumulate. They formed the true heart of any organization!

As an employer himself, he experienced the difficulty in hiring competent and loyal subordinates. It was already difficult to ensure a new hire fell into one of those boxes

That reminded him of the crew of the Barracuda. Captain Silvestra and her girls had been serving on the ship for many years. From one of their earlier conversations, Ves learnt that they didn't plan to stick around forever.

"Do you ever wish to captain a combat carrier?"

Silvestra smiled wryly. "Who wouldn't? I'm not qualified, though. I'm just a captain of a tiny corvette configured as a pleasure yacht. I haven't acquired the relevant experience and knowledge to captain a vessel that ordinarily requires a crew of at least a hundred spacers to function properly. Unlike the mechs you work with, ships are incredibly ponderous vessels that can never function by a single person alone."

"There's the dummy mode, right?"

"Haha!" She chuckled. "Excuse me, sir. That was a funny joke. Think of what starships represent to us. They are more than means of travel. They are self-contained habitats that just happen to possess the capability of stellar travel. A ship regularly launches into the cold and breathless void of interstellar space for months and years at a time. Think of what might happen if an accident occurs and there aren't any knowledgeable engineers or specialists to fix the problem."

"You risk losing a ship worth hundreds of mechs or more along with all of the valuable cargo and people onboard."

"Exactly, sir. Ships aren't just empty shells with an engine and FTL drive strapped onto them. There are thousands of different systems running at the same time. Since you're a mech designer, you should probably know that the more systems are present, the greater the chance that something can go wrong. Even the latest vessels such as our Barracuda are not exempt from unexpected incidents."

"So the need to staff a trained and knowledgeable crew onto a ship is because they are a form of insurance, then?"

The captain nodded. "It's cheaper and more effective to pay for a crew than to let an automated starship be subject to the whims of Murphy's law. Automation has come a very long way. Bots and AIs can run entire starships by themselves, but you never see a ship that is automated to that degree for a very good reason."

"That said, ships still incorporate a lot of automation, right?"

"Right. Some degree of automation is indispensable to modern starships due to their incredible complexity. I believe that is the same case for mechs. The key is to strike a balance between control and convenience. The personnel also have to be trained in taking over the automated functions if they malfunction somehow."

"And this makes combat carriers extremely difficult to crew?"

"Yes. Aside from a combat carrier's high procurement cost and the difficulty of ordering one from the few shipyards capable of constructing them, finding the right crew has always been the biggest challenge. For the captain position, I need to accumulate at least twenty years more experience. For the chief engineer position, Jenn not only has to do the same, but also study all kinds of complicated engineering subjects! The amount of engineers who manage to gain a proficiency in FTL drive theory is extremely small! The position of chief engineer is often the most difficult one to fill!"

Ves gained a deeper appreciation of combat carriers. Unlike small and relatively simple ships like his Barracuda, a big combat carrier truly required highly-trained personnel to function optimally.

"Are light carriers the same?"

"Of course not." Silvestra shook her head. "Light carriers do not have to fulfill so many functions. They're not designed to participate in battles directly, so they lack much of the defensive and damage control systems that are prevalent in combat carriers. Light carriers are more like taxis for mechs. As long as they can fulfill this function adequately, there is no need to add anything more complicated."

"I see. So it's much easier to crew a light carrier."

"Right. Even if you manage to obtain a combat carrier somehow, with the spacers employed by the Avatars and the Sentinels, you won't be able to make full use of your new acquisition."

"How difficult is it to fill up the positions of a combat carrier?"

"Extremely difficult. These spacers are cherished talents. Usually, the ones who enter the private sector are often spacers who have been discharged from the military. Big organizations such as trade consortiums usually keep a very close eye on them. It's practically impossible for you to hire a chief engineer on the open job market!"

Just like every other profession, there were too many people and organizations looking to snap up the truly valuable talents. Even before a chief engineer resigned from the military, he would have probably received hundreds of job offers!

There was little chance for Ves to beat those offers at this time!

"I see. I'll take your words under consideration."

Now was not a good time for him to procure a combat carrier. He didn't have to worry about hiring a crew in that case.

After a brief moment of silence, Captain Silvestra took the initiative to ask a question.

"Sir, do you intend to participate in the invasion of the Red Ocean?"

Ves nodded. This wasn't any secret. It was just that many people quickly dismissed him due to his youth and relative lack of ability.

"I am. Hopefully, Gloriana and I will be able to scrounge up enough merits to redeem a fleet beyonder tickets within a decade."

She looked astonished at his boast. Forget about Ves, even Seniors and some Masters wouldn't be able to earn so many merits that fast!

However, she did not look as surprised as Ves anticipated.

"I believe you can do it, sir. If not ten years, then twenty years. If not twenty years, then thirty!"

"Thank you for your vote of confidence. I didn't expect to hear that from you, captain."

"I have witnessed your rise when you were just an Apprentice, remember?" She smiled. "I know how remarkable you are, Mr. Larkinson. I don't believe your growth has stalled at all. Mech designs such as the Desolate Soldier show that you have only become more capable after you've advanced to Journeyman."

He admired her judgement and her faith in him. Part of it was due to her lengthy years of service in his employ, but a part of it was also about her expectation of his future growth!

Of course, the captain would not bring up this topic for nothing. Ves recognized that Silvestra subtly signalled an intention to climb up in his organization and be a part of his grand expedition to the Red Ocean.

He did not leave her hanging. "Considering your crew's dedication, I might have a place for you and your women in my grand expedition. However, there is a large possibility that some if not all of the starships that make up my expeditionary fleet will be second-class vessels. You will need to become very proficient in crewing them if you want to occupy some of the senior positions of my fleet."

This demand caused her to fall silent in consternation. It wasn't easy to master a second-class ship. The Barracuda alone already consumed a lot of time and energy for her and crew!

"We will do our best." She eventually promised. "We have already invested much of what we learned into developing our skills. We have all neglected our social life in order to serve you better. The life of a spacer is often restrictive and monotonous, but we don't have any other ambitions."

Ves frowned at that. "When was the last time you girls stepped off your ship?"

"Months?" Silvestra shrugged. "I'm not sure. As long as the Barracuda doesn't undergo an extensive maintenance or overhaul like last time, we aren't inclined to step on solid ground. There is nothing planetside that interests us. We have already adapted to spacer life."

"You sound as if you fit right in with the CFA or the spaceborn clans!"

The captain's eyes shone at their mention.

"They are the most eminent spacer groups of humanity! Ever spacer dreams of becoming a part of them. To be born in a spaceborn clan is one of the greatest privileges you can enjoy! While there are many spaceborn clans, the true ones which are affiliated with the CFA are no weaker than first-rate states!"

This statement was very true. While the population base of true spaceborn clans was a lot smaller than states that offered an abundant amount of living space, none of the people born in a spaceborn clan was useless.

The limited space and vast resources required to run a powerful ship meant that anyone born into a spaceborn clan was subject to an intense training regime from youth.

It was not without reason that the CFA almost exclusively recruited new blood from the spaceborn clans! Those born elsewhere often lacked the necessary discipline as well as the respect for tradition and hierarchy.

Having spent a fair amount of time on the Starlight Megalodon, Ves had already concluded that a rigid and tradition-bound organization like the CFA did not fit him at all. He would always have to answer to higher authority!

While the same applied for the MTA as well, at the very least the Association was a lot more loose and decentralized in its internal structure.

However, Ves shouldn't discount the merits of spaceborn clans.

"Unless you are planning on colonizing a planet or founding a state, you should start looking into how you can keep your organization together for several years or decades in space. It is absolutely not simple to sustain an entire society in space. If you don't make the necessary preparations, your expeditionary fleet will surely fall apart after a few years of isolation!"

She had a good point. Ves neglected to consider these difficulties. Of course, with all of the people working for him, someone would have pointed out these problems eventually.

That didn't lessen the importance of her warning. The topics they discussed earlier prompted him to think much more seriously about what ships should make up his expeditionary fleet and how to fill their positions.

It would be easy for him to form a complete third-class expeditionary fleet. However, it was practically impossible to form a second-class fleet. Just procuring the factory ship alone was way beyond Gloriana's means!

Chapter 1660 Deviant Behavior

Ves was no spacer. He only possessed a shallow understanding of the spaceborn life. His time with the Flagrant Vandals and his brief experiences on the Starlight Megalodon only gave him a taste of the difficulty of living years in space.

Considering that it would take a couple of days or so to meet the sandmen in combat, Ves decided he might as well learn more about spacers from the captain of the Barracuda.

"Humans aren't inherently beings who are adapted to space." Silvestra instructed when they moved to the ship's lounge to avoid disturbing the crew working on the bridge. "Unless you are born and raised in a starship environment, it's very hard for you landbound to adjust to living in a cramped living environment which you are bound to share with dozens, hundreds or thousands of people."

Ves calmly petted Lucky's back as his pet dozed in his lap. "What is the main challenge of spaceborn life?"

"There are many challenges." She sighed. "We could go on for days if I have to mention them all. The bigger issue is that many people are different. A problem that can drive one person crazy is just a trivial annoyance to another. This massively complicates the matter because you can't implement a single solution to address all of the problems related to adapting to spacer life."

All of that sounded rather overwhelming.

"Do you have some more general advice that I can put to use right away?"

"Don't wait until the start of your expedition to put all of your people on your vessels. At the moment your fleet heads for the Red Ocean, it should already be in a mature state. Your crews and other personnel should already have adapted to life aboard starships. If you don't test them beforehand, then I can guarantee you that up to thirty percent of your hires will become problem cases!"

"That much!?" Ves gasped.

If thirty percent of his subordinates went stir-crazy from living on a ship for years without touching solid ground, then his expeditionary fleet would definitely enter a dire state!

"Those who can't adapt to spaceborn life pose a threat to themselves, their colleagues and the fleet! Don't underestimate the damage a human can do when they are in charge of a critical section of a ship."

Ves could imagine the possible problems. Perhaps one crazed subordinate might sabotage the FTL drive of a ship in transit to another star system, thereby stranding the ship in the middle of nowhere forever!

Although ships were usually built with a lot of redundancies, those determined enough to ruin everyone's lives might be able to find some way to plunge everyone into the abyss!

For this reason, he took the captain's advice very seriously. If he could test the ability of the subordinates he planned to take along and filter out the ones who wouldn't do well in space, he could save himself a lot of trouble.

"Thank you, Silvestra. This is a very valuable reminder."

"That's what I'm here for, Mr. Larkinson. My girls and I used to be a landbound just like you, so we know what it's like to transition to shipboard life. While it's simple for you to come up with the idea of forming an expeditionary fleet, you are not a spacer. I highly suggest you search for a suitable fleet commander who thoroughly understands the challenges I'm talking about and also understands the ships you intend to add to your fleet."

"Don't we already have a fleet commander?"

Silvestra sighed. "Fleet Commander Rofane is old and unsuitable to lead a fleet of this scope. He will definitely be the first one to reject your offer. You need to find someone who is much more capable than him to take charge of your fleet and bring up the problems that you have never thought about."

"That.. sounds like a challenge. Competent fleet commanders ought to be just as hard if not harder to hire than chief engineers, right?"

"Ordinary, yes, but I don't think you will suffer from this problem." She smirked.

"Oh? Why so?"

"Because you intend to head for the Red Ocean! Think about what that means! As long as you are able to earn enough merits to redeem a beyonder ticket, you've already demonstrated that you are an extremely capable person. Many people would definitely be clamoring to work for you! Not only that, but there are plenty of people in the Milky

Way who are tired of the existing order and want to change their lives by taking advantage of the opportunities lying in wait at the dwarf galaxy!"

That eased some of his worries. "I see. I'll be sure to keep that in mind. I don't think that I'll be able to attract a lot of people at this stage, though. Right now, almost no one believes that I can earn enough merits."

It wasn't simple to satisfy the MTA's demands. As one of the most powerful organizations in human space, it was already capable of meeting most of its own needs!

Even if they provided others the opportunity to earn merits, they still had to abide by the same high standards the MTA applied to its internal members!

The only consolation was that the MTA offered much more opportunities for mech designers and mech pilots to earn merits.

As Ves continued to discuss how he should prepare his expeditionary fleet, time slowly passed by. The defense force continued to close in on the sandman swarm, which for some reason hadn't traveled straight to the only settled planet in the system.

Instead, the sandmen traveled straight towards the nearest asteroid belt, which was something that no one had ever seen before!

The deviating behavior of the sandman fleet was so odd that it immediately attracted a lot of attention!

Commander Magdalena called him on his comm.

"There is a huge issue with this sandman fleet, sir. Not only has it ignored the energy-rich Bentheim System, it isn't even flying close to the inner system where the local sun can provide them with a large amount of energy."

"What does Captain Monlin have to say?"

"She wants us to continue our pursuit. In fact, we're about to accelerate as stopping this sandman fleet has become a lot more urgent! We have to intercept this sandman fleet before it reaches the asteroid belt!"

Ves quickly realized the implications of this development. His eyes widened.

"Since the bodies of sandmen consist of sand and minerals, they're very difficult to distinguish from ordinary rocks! As long as they blend into a rocky asteroid belt, our sensors will lose track of them! Finding the sandmen will be as difficult as finding a needle in a haystack!"

"This is especially the case if the sandman admirals split up. High command is already worried about the possibility of a strategy adopted by the sandmen. Before, the sandmen used to be manageable despite their overwhelming numbers because their fleets always travel straight to the nearest occupied planet as if it was their only mission. This allows us to defeat the fleets one by one because they aren't waiting to pool their strengths with other incoming fleets."

Horror began to suffuse his face. He could very well imagine once the sandmen smarted up and waited to group up with many different fleets before launching their invasion!

As long as the sandmen managed to hide in the middle of an asteroid belt, they could escape destruction and consume the attention of many mechs and starfighters!

The sandmen might even be able to build up their numbers in a star system to the point where they finally possessed the capital to overrun every opposition!

The Bright Republic would never be able to hold out against the sandmen if the aliens actually adopted this alarmingly clever strategy!

"Is it possible that this is the newest evolution of sandmen?"

The Sentinel Commander nodded gravely. "That possibility is on everyone's minds. While nobody is sure that the fleet in this star system is the only one that has adopted a different strategy, high command doesn't want to risk the chance that the sandman admirals leading this fleet might pass on their strategy to other high-caste sandmen!"

"What is their response, then?"

"They've already dispatched some reinforcements from the Bentheim System to assist in the pursuit. If the sandman admirals split up once they reach the asteroid belt, our current troop disposition isn't enough to scour the hiding sandmen."

Splitting up the defense force meant that they became a lot more vulnerable in case the sandmen decided to prepare an ambush.

"There is something else, sir." Magdalena said. "Captain Monlin has ordered you to cease accompanying us. You have to return to planetside immediately!"

"Why?"

"Because it's too dangerous for you! Some of the higher ups speculate that the reason that the sandmen sent this abnormal fleet to Cloudy Curtain is because of you! Your Soldier mechs have made a huge impact on the Sand War to the detriment of our opponents."

"What?! I'm just a mech designer! The sandmen don't care about humans at all! They've never shown any desire to go after high-value targets!"

"I thought so as well, but apparently we've sold the sandmen short." Commander Magdalena darkly responded. "We should discuss your future security arrangements after this incident has passed. For now, you should immediately reverse course."

Technically, Commander Magdalena worked for the LMC, which by extension meant she worked for him. This meant that it was inappropriate for her to issue orders to him as if they were still in the Mech Corps.

He didn't intend to object and throw a tantrum, though. He recognized the urgency of the situation and knew that his continued presence behind the defense force would only pose further problems.

The last thing he should do was act like a spoiled brat and stick his nose into matters that didn't concern him anymore!

The Avatars and Sentinels under Commander Magdalena's command were more than competent enough to address the current threat. That was what he paid for, after all. Leaving this matter to the professionals was the best decision he could make at this point.

"I'll leave the sandman hunting to you, then. Take care, commander."

Once the call ended, Ves sat back and frowned even deeper.

"What are the sandmen up to? Why is this sandman fleet so weird?"

If he was just like any other Brighter, he would have been clueless why the sandmen in the Cloudy Curtain System acted so strange.

Not Ves.

He immediately smelled a plot involving one of his old acquaintances.

It was no coincidence that the sandmen had been stirred into a frenzy a few short years after Ves returned from the frontier.

The sandman race had always maintained their distance to human space out of a healthy respect for humanity's strength. For this centuries-long status quo to change all of a sudden was very odd.

Even now, many analysts in the Komodo Star Sector were scratching their heads why the sandmen decided to commit collective suicide all of a sudden.

Not Ves.

Unlike everyone else, Ves and Calabast were perhaps the only two humans in the galaxy who guessed the truth behind the sandman invasion.

"Damn Sigrund! Can't you leave me alone?!"

This was definitely the hybrid sandman processor pulling tricks on him! Only Sigrund appeared to be able to make the entire sandman race go mad and attack human space without any regard for their own survival!

If the sentient AI could make the sandmen do something as drastic as that, he could definitely pull off another prank by ordering the sandmen to disturb Cloudy Curtain!

After so many years without contact with Sigrund, Ves finally came into direct contact with a shadow of his immense power and influence.

Now that several years had passed since Ves inadvertently released Sigrund into the galaxy, how far had the sentient AI progressed?