

## Mech 1831

### *Chapter 1831 Change of Heart*

With the sandman calamity looming over the rimward side of the star sector, Ves temporarily forgot about the Wodins.

It turned out that the Hexers hadn't been keeping to themselves anymore. Initially, the Wodins largely treated others like air. It was as if interacting with third-raters was beneath them. Why should they spare any attention to their lessers?

The change in attitude came as a surprise. Various Wodins began to show up more often at the organizations affiliated with Ves and the Clan.

Dr. Ranya began to cooperate more extensively with Dr. Lupo and other medical specialists.

Venerable Brutus and a number of mech pilots from the Glory Battalion tutored the Avatars and the Larkinsons on how to pilot a second-class mech.

Even Gloriana showed up at the Friedhold Estate and began to mingle with the Larkinsons!

All of these movements did not escape the attention of the watchful. The Hexers didn't hide their movements, and their intentions were clear.

For some reason, the Wodins wanted to improve their relations with their group.

This made Ves all the more suspicious about their motives. While he knew that Gloriana always wanted her family to accept Ves, it was anything but easy to convince her arrogant and stuck-up brother and cousin to accept their lessers!

The Glory Battalion was likewise outside of her control. Aside from obeying some small requests, they mainly kept to themselves while performing their primary duty of protecting the Wodins.

For some of their mech pilots to join Venerable Brutus in providing assistance to inferior mech pilots was rather astounding. There was no reason for the Hexers to lend a hand to the Avatars and the Larkinsons!

None of them had shown any willingness to adopt Hexer values. This meant that the Hexers were out for something else. What Gavin had told Ves made the most sense.

The Wodins were attempting to charm Ves' people. They not only focused their efforts on the Larkinson Clan, but also the people working for the LMC and other organizations.

This told Ves that the target of this operation was him. The Hexers were only being helpful because of him. At some point, their opinions of him changed.

Ves smelled something fishy was going. Regardless of what happened, Gloriana was definitely at the center of this change!

"It seems I can't avoid her any longer."

The reason he didn't seek her out sooner was because he was afraid that they would only intensify their contradictions. As far as Ves was concerned, it wasn't easy to change their respective viewpoints.

Ves abhorred the Hexadric Hegemony. He didn't even really root for them to win the Komodo War.

Gloriana was the opposite. She possessed a strong affection for her state and wanted Ves to support her views. She always encouraged Ves to change his mindset and accept that women were naturally superior to males!

Not only that, but Gloriana always expressed her desire to bring Ves back to the Hegemony in order to introduce him to her mother and relatives and gain their acceptance.

While Ves was fine with trying to win over the Wodin Dynasty, he very much objected to the need to travel to the Hegemony!

Though he tried to avoid saying that to Gloriana, the cat was out of the bag now. Perhaps she always suspected that Ves was less than enthusiastic at the idea of traveling to her home state, but saying it in the open made it impossible for her to ignore this contradiction!

To be honest, Ves had become rather apprehensive towards her reaction ever since they separated after that disastrous evening.

Would she stew by herself? Would she erupt and go crazy? Or would she simply decide to pack up her bags and leave?

Ves considered the latter to be extremely unlikely. He knew that his girlfriend was too attached to him to dump him. She needed his design philosophy in order to advance her career!

What Ves feared the most was the possibility that Gloriana attempted to drag him back to the Hegemony by force.

Suffice to say, Ves would not go down without a fight.

Fortunately, the worst-case scenario hadn't taken place. Instead, the Wodins were engaged in a charm offensive that indirectly signalled to Ves that Gloriana had a change of mind that was favorable to him. Otherwise, why bother with all of these superfluous actions that didn't benefit the Wodins at all aside from earning his favor?

Though Ves was aware that the Wodins had ulterior motives in mind, he wasn't ungrateful. His people could genuinely use the help.

Since Gloriana appeared to have mellowed out since their argument, Ves straightforwardly scheduled a meeting with her after hearing his assistant's report.

Later that day, Ves greeted her in a closed office at the design labs.

Both of them were mech designers, so they were most comfortable in a design environment.

In the main labs, the two design teams were quietly busy at work in developing two different upgraded variants of the Aurora Titan design. The Larkinson seeds were around as well.

In this productive design environment, the two lovers met each other after almost a week of tense avoidance.

Gloriana stepped forward with a smile. It was as if hardly anything had changed!

"Hello Ves."

"Hello Gloriana."

While the two mech designers greeted each other, Clixie squirmed out of her grasp and jumped onto the desk. The organic cat nonchalantly sauntered over to Lucky and bit his metallic cheek before placing her paws on the Larkinson Mandate.

"Hihihi." Gloriana burst out in a giggle. "Clixie missed you all so much. She wanted to go back to you so badly, you know!"

"I think she's more interested in my book than me." Ves offered her a brief smile.

It was difficult to remain impassive in her presence. The moment her scent wafted over to his nose, Ves was reminded of the good times. He didn't want their relationship to remain so awkward.

After their cats broke the ice, their owners relaxed in each other's company. Gloriana eagerly sat down next to Ves and faced him with a smile.

"How have you been, Ves?"

"I'm.. okay. I'm almost ready to begin my next design project."

"You're talking about the modular mech platform for the Larkinsons, right?"

Ves nodded. "It's going to be a big project. This mech is very important to my group. The future of the Larkinson Clan is at stake."

"You'll need my help."

"Yes."

"Then let me. I'm almost done with my errands. While it will take some more time for my mental exhaustion to fade, I'm still capable of performing many tasks."

"I know. It's not that simple, though. I didn't call you here to design a mech right away. I called you here for other reasons."

She sighed. "Do we really have to, Ves?"

Ves tried to look determined. "We can't ignore our problems forever. Let's settle our differences now rather than later."

"Okay.."

"First, let's talk about myself. I'm not a Hexer. I will never become a Hexer. I was raised as a Brighter and a Larkinson and that will never change. I'm very content with who I am. I don't want to do anything with Hexers, and I especially don't want to embrace the Hexer way of life. I can accept that you have different attitudes and beliefs, but that stops the moment they infringe upon my values. I'm a man, not a boy. Can you accept that?"

"You're a man." Gloriana readily said.

Her frank response surprised Ves.

She never said those words! In the past, she was too much of a Hexer to acknowledge that Ves was more than a boy! The implication was that she always considered him to belong to the inferior gender!

For her to turn around and plainly contract her culture and religion was an incredibly huge divergence! Her fellow Hexers would definitely be outraged if they could hear her now! Acknowledging a male as an equal clashed against everything they believed in! Some Hexers were even willing to kill themselves rather than admit that men were equal to women!

Ves always thought that Gloriana was far too immersed in the values and principles she grew up with to change her mind.

Yet as Ves studied his girlfriend through multiple means, he didn't sense that she was lying!

"How come you have a change of heart?" Ves frowned.

"I always thought that you were different from other boys. I wouldn't have loved you so earnestly if that wasn't the case. In my heart, I never treated you as just a boy. It took this long for me to recognize and express this truth."

"You're still a Hexer, though. Besides me, you don't acknowledge any other boy as a man."

"That's.. true." She reluctantly replied, knowing that Ves didn't take that very well. "I won't say I've abandoned my roots. Just like you are still committed to your identity as a Larkinson and a Brighter, I will always be a Hexer."

"Has anything changed at all, then?"

"I'm not the same anymore, Ves." She placed her small and delicate palm over his hand. "I won't let anything get in the way of our relationship again. I was truly afraid that we would break up over this issue! I don't want to repeat this experience again. Therefore, after a lot of thought, I decided to do my best to ease any possible sources of tension between us. Can you blame a woman for doing everything she can to secure her boy—, I mean man?"

Her silky touch and her warm body temperature quickly sent a surge of pleasure through his body!

Ves tried his best to stick to his priorities.

"Is that why your relatives are moving about lately? What's up with that? The Wodins and the Glory Battalion have made it abundantly clear that they don't like me. What did you do to change their mind?"

She grinned and started to lean in his direction. "I persuaded them. They're willing to give us more chances now."

"I find that hard to believe. They still regard me as a boy, right?"

"It doesn't matter." She stated. "They don't have to agree with me to support me. As long as we promise enough benefits, they're willing to close an eye."

Ves still wasn't convinced. Ranya had always treated him with disdain, and Brutus was insanely overprotective towards his sister!

It was impossible for them to casually ignore some troubling details!

"Tell me the truth. What is going on? Why are you and the Wodins so accommodating all of a sudden? It is completely outside your nature as Hexers."

She sighed. "It's nothing complicated, Ves. Both Ranya and Brutus weren't exactly nice to you before, but they were only looking out for me. I had a lot of time on my hands lately, so I decided to seek them out. Once I convinced them that I am only happy when I'm with you, they became open to compromise. I managed to make a deal with them to bless my relationship with you in exchange for some promises."

"What kind of promises."

"Oh, it's no big deal. I only promised to give our Wodin Dynasty a place on our grand expedition."

"How much?"

"Nothing much! Just a couple of ships is fine! It'll still be our fleet, assuming we can scrounge enough MTA merits by ourselves."

Though this sounded like a reasonable concession, Ves sensed it was anything but simple!

One question stood out.

"What does your mother think?"

Gloriana released a nervous laugh. "We didn't contact her yet. She is.. a bit more difficult to convince. Let's just follow our original plan and earn her approval through our excellent design work. Is that alright?"

So only the Wodins around Gloriana had a change of heart.

"What's the point, then?"

"It's very helpful, Ves! It shows that we can win over the rest of my dynasty! We just need more time to prove our worth as a couple! Once we get over this hurdle, you don't have to get involved with the Hegemony ever again! My relatives are willing to let me join your expedition and leave the Milky Way Galaxy in order to explore an entirely new dwarf galaxy. Doesn't that sound great? We can start an entirely new life that's completely divorced from our old lives. It's perfect!"

Was it? Ves couldn't help but feel that there was something fishy about all of these changes...

### *Chapter 1832 Ves the Man*

Regardless of the inexplicable change of heart among the Wodins, Ves welcomed it anyway.

After all, it was better for him to forge some friendships with Gloriana's relatives considering how they played a central role in her life.

It was a lot more difficult to sustain their relationship if Ves still couldn't get along with his in-laws!

Once Gloriana expressed that she was willing to call him a man, Ves believed that they had finally achieved a breakthrough!

He was glad that Gloriana managed to settle the contradiction from her end. Now that she was willing to acknowledge him as a man and no longer insisted so much on bringing him home, Ves no longer felt as constrained in her presence.

They spoke frankly about their future aspirations.

"Once I leave for the Red Ocean, I don't intend to return." He said.

"Why? I never really understood why you're so eager to leave your home. Sure, the Komodo Star Sector isn't as prosperous as the other parts of human space, but it is still our root."

Ves couldn't say he was eager to leave because the Five Scrolls Compact might be eager to get back their missing Holy Scroll!

He had to use another excuse.

"Think about what humanity has achieved. Our civilization has managed to defeat some of the most powerful alien empires in the Milky Way, and after a hiatus that has lasted for four centuries, we are finally picking up where we left off!"

Gloriana tilted her head. "I didn't think you were so broadminded about humanity's position. This isn't our fight. The Big Two will take care of everything."

"The Big Two are a bunch of bastards." Ves retorted. "Look at their track record since the outbreak of the Sand War. What have they done to help our states resist the sandman invasion? A single half-hearted decapitation strike and a tardy response to the latest movements of the sandmen inspires anything but confidence in their commitment to defend humanity! At best, they're swamped with so many priorities that their

resources are spread too thin. At worst, they no longer care about common humans anymore!"

Whatever the case, Ves interacted with the CFA and MTA often enough to get a measure of their mindset. They considered the Komodo Star Sector to be nothing more than an insignificant corner of human space. Even if the sandmen scoured the entire frontier star sector of life, the higher ups of the Big Two still wouldn't care!

His girlfriend directed a scrutinizing gaze at him. "I admit you have a point, but it's not so easy to elevate ourselves to their level."

"At the very least we should make an attempt to transcend our modest beginnings. We are capable of more. I just know it. Sooner or later, we'll become Masters with very specialties. Will we still be confined in the galactic rim at the time?"

"Hmm.." Gloriana pressed her finger on her lips. "You're not wrong, but it's incredibly hard to reach Master. How many mech designers have tried and failed? The chance of success is miniscule! We should be devoting most if not all of our efforts towards progressing our design philosophy. It's best to do so in an environment that best facilitates our work."

"And you think that environment is home?"

She blinked. "Yup."

"Well for you, that makes sense. For me, not so much. Has a boy ever advanced to Master in your state?"

"Uhm.."

"Do you realize how much damage you will do to my chances of advancement if you want to turn me into a Hexer? You're more liable to snuff my future instead! This will definitely affect your chances of reaching Master as well since you're so dependent on me to design your best mechs. Considering this situation, it's in your best interest to keep me happy, and that means allowing me to decide where I want to go. I've always yearned to travel and explore the greater multiverse. The Red Ocean is a great opportunity to start my sojourn."

"What about me?" She asked.

"Are you happy here?"

"I'm always happy whenever I'm in your presence, Ves. You know that."



Ves grinned. "Then you'll be happy wherever I go, right? Do you need to return to the Hegemony and your mother to be happy, or are you content to stay by my side even if I'm heading to an entirely different galaxy?"

His words caused her to fall into thought.

"Now that you put it that way, I think you're right. I feel a lot better about my decision now. While I won't lie to you and say that I won't be happier if I can be with you at home, I don't mind if you disagree. Will you at least allow me to invite you home for a visit? It's not going to be permanent, I swear!"

He grimaced. "I'm sorry, Gloriana, but if the attitude of other Hexers is as bad as I think, I don't think I can agree."

"My mother—"

"I don't necessarily have to visit your mother. Why doesn't she visit me instead? I know it's rather inconvenient for her to travel while the Komodo War is heating up, but once it's over, will it be okay to invite her on a foreign excursion?"

His novel suggestion took her aback. Gloriana never contemplated the possibility that her mother would leave Hegemony space in order to meet her boyfriend.

On the surface, Gloriana wasn't very optimistic that her mother would agree. Hexers generally never left Hegemony space without a good reason. It simply wasn't done. The rest of the human space was dominated by states who still wallowed in their ignorance.

It was very unpleasant for Hexers to be in the company of people who treated men as equals rather than the boys they truly were! After a lot of bad experiences where Hexers futilely tried to enlighten foreigners of the falsehoods they perpetuated, most Hexers simply stopped traveling abroad!

Gloriana knew what her mother was like. For someone as strict as her to travel outside the familiar confines of Hegemony space and become exposed to people like Ves who insisted on being treated like men would not go over well!

This was especially the case when their fellow Hexers would likely look down on her mother for paying a visit to her prospective son-in-law!

Therefore, while Ves' suggestion sounded great, Gloriana did not see any way for her mother to acquiesce.

Nonetheless, she wasn't in the mood to contradict her boyfriend at this point. She worked so hard and made a very huge sacrifice to make amends with Ves. She wasn't willing to press this matter any further.

She offered Ves a reassuring smile. "My mother would definitely be intrigued. I really do hope you can meet my mother in person. I love you, but I love her as well. It would be great if the two of you can get along!"

They babbled a bit as they grew more comfortable in each other's company. Both of them shed their earlier reserve and seemingly restored their prior intimacy.

Their cats were happy they made up as well. Lucky crawled onto Gloriana's lap and turned it into his bed while Clixie sauntered over to Ves and begged for head scratches.

"Miaow."

"Oh, you missed me, Clixie?"

"Miaow miaow."

"Oh, you missed the Golden Cat you mean?"

"Miaowwww!"

"She's not your kitten, you know. The Golden Cat only inherited a tiny portion of your essence."

The Larkinson Mandate contained the marks and signatures of hundreds of clan members. Lucky and Clixie only took up two of its pages.

"Miaow miaow miaow!"

Of course, a cat like Clixie didn't see it that way. The newly-created ancestral spirit was a cat, ergo Clixie and Lucky were responsible for raising her into a proper cat!

This reminded Ves of how cat-like the Golden Cat turned out. He hadn't actually expected his latest spiritual product to adopt so many cat-like traits. His other spiritual products became a lot more ambiguous when they came into existence. They were mostly defined by their conceptual traits rather than their appearances.

Yet for some reason or another, the Golden Cat almost completely adopted the appearance and the personality of a cat! She even communicated in the same fashion as Lucky and Clixie!

Whatever the case, Clixie wasn't entirely wrong when she claimed that the Golden Cat needed to be raised like one. It wouldn't do for a cat to bark like a dog or something.

Ves also considered it a way to develop the Golden Cat's personality. Though her connections with the Larkinsons provided her with plenty experiences, none of them

belonged to her. How could the Larkinson Clan's ancestral spirit possibly learn how to love and protect its members when it never lived its own life?

"Miaow."

"Oh, you want to be able to touch the Golden Cat like Lucky?" He frowned. "That's a very tall order. It's not that easy to be able to do what he can do. At the very least, you need to develop your mind."

Though Clixie looked disappointed, Ves couldn't do anything about it. Even he lost his ability to turn himself intangible after visiting the ruins of the Crystal Builders!

At the very least, Clixie needed to develop spiritual potential in order to interact with an incorporeal existence like the Golden Cat.

Was it even possible for a cat to surpass the extraordinary threshold?

The chance was probably slim for an ordinary housecat, but a Rubarthan Sentinel Cat was an entirely different beast.

In any case, if Ves ever developed the ability to stimulate spiritual potential in norms, he would definitely help Clixie out. She was one of the few entities who was capable of keeping Lucky in line!

Once they were done with fooling around, Ves stretched his hand towards Gloriana.

"Let's design a mech."

"Okay." She replied with a smile.

Both of them instantly entered familiar territory. Once they called up a projected design interface, the pair soon shifted into a work mindset.

They began with an empty file.

"Let me explain the concept I have in mind." Ves spoke and started to draft a few contours in the design interface. "The modular mech platform that I've chosen to design is meant to serve as a bridge between third-class and second-class designs. It's highly tailored towards our Larkinson mech pilots, but other mech pilots should still be able to pilot it as well."

A very rudimentary draft came into being.

"So this is the base platform?" She asked.

He nodded. "Yes. I've chosen to keep as many commonalities together as I can get away with. I have to accommodate several different configurations. The good news is that they are similar enough that I can retain most of the torso chassis as well as the legs and head. The bad news is that we have to juggle four different configurations at a time."

He drafted four separate pairs of arms and accompanying weapons. Gloriana instantly recognized the mech types that the Larkinson mech was supposed to integrate.

"A rifleman mech, a space knight, a lancer mech and a swordsman mech. That's not nearly as bad as most modular mech platforms, you know."

"You're right, but the caveat is that we only have three months to finish this design!"

She winced. "That is very little time. Even I'm not confident I can wrap up this design in such a short timeframe."

"I believe we can do it. We just need to plan our time well and make the most out of our design teams."

"It'll be difficult to complete all of our work with just two design teams. Maybe you should consider hiring additional ones."

"Maybe. Anyway, let's start with discussing what aspects can remain fixed and which aspects we need to vary between configurations."

This was a very important discussion, and Ves was very eager to hear what Gloriana had to say. Her technical fluency was a bit better than his, so she was a much better authority on what to decide to push to the base platform and what should be tailored for different configurations.

Gloriana immediately put her analytical mind to use. "Let's start with the space knight configuration. It's the heaviest and most comprehensive configuration. We should first decide whether to augment this configuration with additional armor cover. This can come in the form of a rainment or..."

### *Chapter 1833 The Protectors*

Venerable Brutus Wodin never expected to mingle with the lesser beings of the galaxy.

He looked down on the third-raters not just because they were inferior, but also because they were ignorant.

It was too difficult for him to get used to the sight of boys issuing orders to women, and women deferring to the weaker gender.

Society outside the sacred Hegemony was upside-down! Either people believed that boys were equal to women, or they thought that boys were actually better!

What a travesty!

Nonetheless, his sister ordered him to smile and make nice with the aboriginals.

Since she had been living among the unenlightened beings for years at Centerpoint and in the Bright Republic, she had long become accustomed to their heretical behavior.

She freely shared her methods with him and gave him some tips to keep his disgust bottled up and out of sight.

Right now, regardless of how much he wanted to throttle the necks of the arrogant boys and force them to treat women like princesses, he had to stand aside and pretend there was nothing wrong!

Sometimes, the expert pilot wished he could just hole up in his Serendipity and quietly wait until it was time to return to the familiar embrace of his home state.

Alas, Gloriana wanted him to be out and about, so Brutus had to do what she asked regardless of his preferences.

He soon became more uncomfortable than he had even been in battle!

There had even been a handful of times where precocious women tried to order him around. They possessed a shallow understanding of Hexer culture and thought that men were universally conditioned to follow the instructions of any woman!

Brutus wasn't offended by their attempts to extract favors from him. Instead, he was amused.

"I am sorry, madame, but I am already in the service of the Glory Battalion. I only obey the instructions of my designed superiors."

Just because he was a male Hexer didn't mean that any random woman could boss him around. He was a uniformed soldier, which meant he was already obliged to follow the orders of someone who had the right to command him. Civilians and bystanders only deserved his respect, not his devotion!

Even if he wasn't in active service, he still wouldn't listen to the lesser women. As a boy, Brutus was always in the care of female Hexer.

At home, that would be his mother.

Here, Brutus followed the arrangements of his sister and to a lesser degree his cousin.

If a local woman wanted to gain control over him, then she should ask Gloriana's permission, not his own! He didn't have the right to make this decision!

Fortunately, once he cleared up this misunderstanding, the local women no longer pestered him with inane requests for 'massages' or 'private tutoring sessions.'

Once he gently taught the locals how to address him and what they were allowed to do, Brutus no longer found his daily instruction sessions to be a chore.

Despite their inferior piloting qualifications, their skill level was higher than he expected of third-raters. The Larkinson clan members impressed him the most. Each of them possessed a solid if basic foundation that made it easier for him to teach some of the more advanced piloting concepts.

The Larkinsons were also a bit more well-behaved and disciplined than others. Their military-oriented background and heritage allowed Brutus to communicate with them in a way that was both efficient and curt.

In the week since he started to volunteer his time, he did something he never expected at the start.

He began to develop a closer bond with a couple of aboriginals.

One of the people who earned his acknowledgement was Jannzi Larkinson.

Though Brutus was aware that the Larkinson Clan was an off-shoot of a family that was famous for producing a lot of expert pilots, he never met one in person.

Jannzi came close, though. Some expert pilots like Brutus were capable of picking this up. He instantly became intrigued when she walked by him one day.

Though the Larkinson Clan also had another mech pilot, Brutus completely disregarded the boy in favor of studying the intriguing woman who radiated a similar kind of strength than him. The more he studied her, the more he became intrigued.

He had the feeling they shared something in common with each other!

However, when he approached her on his own accord, Jannzi didn't exhibit as much interest towards him as the other Larkinsons.

"Do you need something, Venerable Brutus?" She crossed her arms as she was standing at the foot of the Shield of Samar.

"Please call me Brutus, madame." He gestured towards her large and hefty mech.

"That's a spaceborn mech, right? It's not very maneuverable on land. Pardon me for saying so, but it doesn't seem you are getting much out of practicing with this mech

under standard gravity conditions. You are much better served if you practice in space or switch to another like the Paravan."

Jannzi frowned. "I appreciate your advice, but I am content with my training methods. Piloting my personal mech under these conditions isn't as useless as you think. The bonds we share with our mechs is just as important as cultivating our battle skills."

Her answer confused Brutus a bit. Though he adored his Star Dancer a bit more than usual due to his sister's involvement in its design, it was still inevitable for expert pilots to lose or replace their mechs.

"You'll eventually outgrow your mech, you know. In fact, it's already the case. This mech is far too sluggish and weak to express your full skill."

"You're not the first person who said that to me. I don't care. My mech is my partner. I wouldn't give it away for anything! Besides, Ves already promised me that he'll upgrade my mech soon. I trust in his abilities."

The conversation between the expert candidate and the expert pilot proceeded in a much more stilted fashion than Brutus anticipated.

Eventually, Jannzi turned around and started to float up to the cockpit of her personal mech.

"I'm already content with my training." She spoke as she increased the distance between them. "If you want to be of actual use, then I highly suggest you pay a visit to the Friedhold Estate. There is a woman there who's all alone and wallowing in her own misery. None of us Larkinsons managed to rescue her from the abyss. Maybe you might have some better luck in this regard."

The Aurora Titan soon came only and thundered out of the yard with heavy, solid footsteps that rumbled everyone's footing!

The Hexer expert pilot watched the oversized mech go, intrigued by Jannzi's words and the mech's surprisingly comforting glow.

Brutus resisted the urge to request the Avatars to pilot a mech of the same model. He had heard many good things about these so-called glows, but he thought they were only useful for lower-ranked mech pilots.

Experiencing the strong glow of this iconic-looking space knight opened his mind to the specialty of his sister's boyfriend. Though Brutus only caught a glimpse of its glow, he already yearned for more!

"So this is the power of the proto-gods my sister has been talking about." He whispered.

To think that each glow came from an actual divine entity. He started to see why Gloriana became so obsessed with their utility in mech design.

After Brutus finished his daily tutoring session, he decided to follow up on the Larkinson expert candidate's words. He boarded a shuttle and traveled to the Friedhold Estate where Gloriana had been spending some of her time lately.

The Larkinson clan members who lived there greeted him with enthusiasm. He declined their offer to sit with the veterans and talk about old times and asked where he could find the so-called woman who was all alone.

An elderly Larkinson matron quickly jerked her head towards an enclosed courtyard situated in the corner of the estate ground.

"You must be looking for Davia Stark. She's a poor little thing. She fought heroically against the sandmen in the initial stages of the invasion, only to lose all of her comrades, family and state. The losses broke her. Even now, we have tried to introduce some cheer in her life, but it's like she is dead inside."

That sounded ominous. Brutus followed the elder Larkinson woman to the courtyard and found the woman in question resting under the shade of an apple tree.

A desolate atmosphere surrounded her. It was as if all of the cheer and pleasantry was being sucked into a black hole centered around her body.

An instinctive response came out Brutus, yet somehow he failed to get a grip on the woman!

Yet even as Madame Stark looked completely broken, Brutus sensed an inner strength within her that seemed to resonate with him. There was more to this mech pilot than met the eye.

He stepped forward until he came up to her sitting form. It was as if she had collapsed against the tree. Her dull eyes barely noticed his approach and her body was completely devoid of strength.

"Hello." He said in a gentle voice. He completely put aside his Hexer demeanor. "You look like you can use a friend."

"..."

Davia didn't even bother to look up at him. So many people had already tried to engage her in conversation. None succeeded. The Larkinsons only made marginal progress in mending her broken existence.



Though Brutus failed to elicit the reaction he wanted, he did not show any disappointment. Instead, Davia's condition inspired more interest from him. Aside from pitying her condition, his intuition also hinted that she was much closer to his level of existence than she appeared!

He sat down next to her while maintaining a modest distance.

"You are probably unaware of my identity. Let me introduce myself. I am Venerable Brutus Wodin. I am an expert pilot serving in the Glory Battalion. Perhaps you have heard of us already."

"..."

"I've heard a little about your life experiences from the Larkinsons. I'm sorry for your losses. Life and death is inevitable in war. As a Hexer, my state bears some culpability in failing to protect our star sector from the aggression of alien invaders."

Davia finally made a reaction. She minutely shook her head and whispered a response.

"It's not your responsibility. Only I'm at fault."

"That.. you should never think that way. I've heard how many fleets the sandmen threw at the border states. None of your forces could have withstood so many sandmen. Your states were already doomed the moment the sandmen decided to invade. Sure, they might have fared better if your people made more preparations, but even then that will only delay the inevitable."

Being reminded of the failures of the past only caused Davia to sink even deeper.

Brutus noticed his mistake. He placed a hand on her back.

"Look. You survived. That's good. That means that at least one person is able to carry forth and keep the memories of your comrades and people alive. You have a responsibility to prevent their names and deeds from fading. If the records and memories of their existences have truly gone to dust, then you will have lost even more. Don't let them be forgotten. Find a way to make people remember."

He was actually voicing a Hexer principle, though he was mindful enough to strip the hexism aspects from his explanation. He already learned that it was not a good idea to persuade foreigners to the merits of Hexer culture.

He succeeded in getting a reaction out of Davia this time.

"I came from a border state called the Vindmar Republic." Davia cracked her voice, as if she was unused to talking. "It was a weak state, and life was anything but perfect so close to the frontier. It was my home, though. No one remembers Vindmar anymore. It

is just a single mention in a long list of fallen states. Fewer people even remember the people who lived there."

"This is why you matter, Davia." He encouragingly said. "You are their legacy. The Vindmar Republic will always live on so long as you preserve your precious memories. You may not be able to bring them back, but you can help them move on by commemorating their existence."

She started to draw herself out of her misery in order to contemplate his suggestion. She paid more and more attention to the mech pilot who visited her. "Who are you?"

The expert pilot offered her a reassuring smile. "I am a protector, just like you."

#### *Chapter 1834 Broadened Varian*

Two projections appeared into view. Each of them displayed a mech that bore close resemblance to each other.

There were differences, though. Perhaps a layman might mistake them as identical, but there were many interesting divergences in the eyes of a trained professional.

Both Ves and Gloriana acted as the judges of this unofficial competition.

The two design teams of the LMC had been tasked with developing a minor revision to the Aurora Titan design that incorporated some specific upgrades.

This was one of the ways Ves came up with to upgrade Jannzi's Shield of Samar without spending an excessive amount of time on this chore.

It wasn't as if Ves intended to neglect her. He simply thought that it wasn't necessary for him to be involved in every step of the way. Since he spent some effort into forming some design teams, he might as well make use of their capabilities.

The results met his expectations. While none of his subordinate mech designers were as good as him or Gloriana, they hadn't been told to design a completely new mech from scratch. Working around the framework of an existing design was much more convenient as they didn't have to take so many variables into account.

By issuing this assignment to them, Ves not only saved a lot of time, but also tested their individual strengths.

"What do you think, Gloriana?" He asked.

His girlfriend inspected the efforts of the Novices and Apprentices thoroughly by manipulating the projections and zooming in on many specific sections of the wireframe model of their work.

"They're both a little rough, but that is a given considering their level of skill and the amount of time you gave them. The best I can say about them is that they are both decent enough to be used as a base for further refinement. I believe that is one of your intentions."

He nodded. "Both of these designs have incorporated solutions that I can adopt in the final version of the minor revision."

To upgrade Jannzi's mech, Ves intended to adopt the implementations from both designs, picking and choosing whichever one was better. If there weren't any solutions that satisfied him, then he could always skip it or develop his own solution.

In that regard, the designs produced by their respective teams already met his standard. It didn't matter if their implementation was lacking as long as the fundamentals were correct.

He still had to provide some feedback and judge which one was better. One of the reasons for setting up multiple design teams was to foster friendly competition between his subordinates.

As long as it didn't go too far, then the desire to upstage their rivals would push his mech designers to deliver better results!

"Let's begin with the variant designed by the first design team." He gestured at the slightly smaller of the two projected mechs.

The first design team consisted of five Kinner mech pilots. While they had one less mech designer, they all shared a common background and mindset while retaining their own identities.

In other words, they were much like the Larkinsons in how well they cooperated with each other. Over the past months, they formed an increasingly cohesive team where each mech designer did their own part.

The variant they submitted to Ves reflected the design philosophies adopted by the Tovars. It was a mech that not only fulfilled his demands, but also expanded on the concept of the base model.

"I see that this mech is a bit more mobile than what we are used to seeing in an Aurora Titan." He remarked.

Miles Tovar stepped forward and nodded. As the leader of the first design team, he cleared every decision.

"Over the course of our design work, we decided to pay a visit to the Avatars to see Jannzi Larkinson and the Shield of Samar in action. We saw that she was spending a

fair amount of time walking around with her mech. Though the Aurora Titan is technically a landbound mech, with the vastly-upgraded power reactor you've given us, we can strengthen our variant to such an extent that we can divert more power to its mobility."

"The Aurora Titan is primarily a spaceborn mech." Ves reminded them. "I did not optimize it for landbound combat at all. While it is capable of participating in a battle on land, that should only be reserved as a last resort."

Miles already had an argument ready. "This distinction is less strict when it comes to second-class mechs, right? Miss Jannzi is also almost certain to become an expert pilot one day. This means her future mech will be so powerful that it shouldn't be much of a problem to pilot her mech in multiple different environments. Just as how Venerable Ghanso's Glittering Comet can fly in space as well as in the air, we think that Jannzi may be better served if she gains some practice with piloting her mech on land."

"I see that you have focused mostly on making the Aurora Titan viable on land as opposed to in the air." Ves pointed out.

"The mech is simply too heavy." Miles shrugged. "We discussed how to add aerial capability to the Aurora Titan, but it's simply too inefficient because its flight system doesn't scale that well with increased power. Putting too much stress on them will increase the risk of catastrophic failure, and that is something we can never approve."

For this reason, the Tovars decided to focus on adapting the Aurora Titan for land combat while retaining all of its spaceborn combat capabilities at the same time.

They did so through implementing various solutions. First, they made the flight system detachable so that its wing structure wouldn't get in the way when they weren't needed.

Second, they strengthened the legs and mech engine in order to increase the mobility and weight-bearing capacity of the Aurora Titan.

As a spaceborn mech, Ves initially placed little emphasis on its legs. It only had to be strong enough for the mech to move in and out of the mech stables of a ship under standard gravity conditions.

That wasn't enough to make the mech viable in landbound combat, so the Tovars spent a significant amount of effort in strengthening their variant's legs.

All in all, they succeeded in what they set out to do. Much of this had to do with Pachtold Tovar, who specialized in mechanical locomotion, and Gilbert Tovar, who was good in mass optimization.

Their respective specialties was one of the main reasons why the first design team opted to choose this route.

Overall, Ves approved of their initiative and ingenuity. He wanted his design team to be more than just a bunch of forgettable design bots.

"It can work on land." Gloriana admitted. "The question is whether these changes are worth giving up other changes and if this version of the Aurora Titan stays true to your vision."

Aside from Gloriana, pretty much every mech designer was unable to design a worthy variant of his mechs. The moment other people started deviating from his original vision, they damaged the spiritual foundation of the mech. It also didn't help that they didn't adopt the right approach and often polluted the X-Factor of the base model with scattered thoughts!

Ves had already taught the two design teams to center their minds and minimize their mental distractions whenever they engaged in their work.

While that wasn't enough to keep his mech designs pure after they got their hands on them, at least they didn't leave such a big spiritual mess behind.

He once explained to Gloriana that he sometimes imagined that he was a cleaning bot assigned to a public lavatory.

Every time, some kid or hooligan 'misjudged' their aim and left some 'collateral damage' behind. Ves had to go out and clean up all of the 'debris'.

If he didn't do so, then the variants would always lose their spiritual qualities that his works were known for! This was one of the main reasons why many of his fellow colleagues cursed him for adopting such a difficult and abstruse design philosophy. The inability to take advantage of his work was one of the biggest reasons his mechs hadn't proliferated as widely as mechs designed by other mech designers!

Of course, the upside to this was that Ves maintained a very high control over his brand of mechs. At the very least, Ves didn't have to worry too much about ignorant competitors butchering his original works.

In any case, every mech designer he added to his design teams knew better. At the very least, Ves told them to be more diligent in their aim so that they wouldn't deviate from his intentions too much.

Though the variants produced by the design teams definitely had problems, at least they were salvageable to an extent.

The variant developed by the first design team was a bit worse off in this regard, though.

"Your work is admirable, and your ideas have merit, but I'm not so sure if branching out is wise." He said.

He recalled his original inspiration for the Aurora Titan. He designed the mech after an unforgettable Mastery experience where he witnessed the apotheosis of Venerable Eloise Pelican and subsequently saw her evoke the rare state of Unity of Man and Machine with an aged and worn-out Valiant Warden mech!

Ves semi-purposefully designed the Aurora Titan to be a machine that could evoke this heroic feat one day.

He wasn't sure whether broadening the scope of the Shield of Samar would hinder Jannzi from reaching this state.

Once Ves pointed out some other aspects and finished with his feedback, Gloriana expressed her own views.

"From a technical standpoint, I'm not very comfortable with some of the design choices your team has made." She pointed at several shaky aspects of the variant.

"Look at these sections. They're all weaker than they need to be because you're trying to reconcile both spaceborn and landbound requirements in a single mech. While it's true that it is not that big of a deal to expand the range of environments a second-class mech can operate, this only applies to the upper end of our mechs. If the tech and materials aren't good enough, if the parts are too large to fit too many options in a frame, then the end product will always have shortcomings in both."

"The spaceborn combat capabilities of your variant has dipped." Ves observed.

"We knew this would happen, but we think we kept the drop in performance within an acceptable range." Miles said. "Losing 5 to 10 percent in spaceborn combat performance to make the Aurora Titan viable on land is an acceptable tradeoff in our eyes."

"What is acceptable and what is not acceptable is different to everyone." Gloriana emphasized. "I will tell you now that this price is way too much in my eyes! You might not care, but have you ever asked us or Jannzi Larkinson whether we approve of this price?"

"Uhh.. we have been remiss in that."

Neither Ves nor Gloriana looked amused.

"These kinds of changes are significant enough that you have a responsibility to solicit the feedback of the people who are directly affected by your decisions! At the very least,

you should notify Jannzi in advance so that she has an opportunity to lodge an objection!"

The Tovars looked suitably chastised, which at least showed they knew their faults.

Ves understood why they slipped up. The Tovars were born with silver spoons in their mouths and always benefited from a lot of privilege.

Their high background and status made it difficult for them to adopt a service mindset that was expected of a mech designer.

Mech designers existed to serve mech pilots. This was a basic principle of the mech industry, and one that Ves still agreed with despite his skepticism towards the MTA.

Though the changes the Tovars came up with looked fairly good in the perspective of a mech designer, the fact that they never took the interests of the end user in mind was a significant dereliction of their duty!

Gloriana found other faults with their variant. Though she held herself back, the Tovars still took some heavy blows.

"Okay, that's enough." Ves put his hand on her shoulder. "Their level isn't as high as ours. We can't expect them to do better on these fronts. It's already good enough that they managed to design a variant that works to this extent."

She shrugged off his hand. "They're not working hard enough! You did a lot better when you were still an Apprentice! If you can avoid these common mistakes, then so should they!"

Urgh. Ves shook his head. Gloriana was the same as ever!

### *Chapter 1835 Criticism*

Once Ves and Gloriana finally finished the evaluation of the first variant, they turned their attention to the second variant.

Whereas the Tovar Design Team sought to broaden the scope of the Aurora Titan, the Ylvaine Design Team instead stuck to the original identity of the super-medium space knight.

The mech looked a bit larger and heavier than before. Its armor layout featured significant changes as many plating sections had been thickened to offer even more protection!

Evidently, the second design team wasn't afraid of increasing the total mass of the Aurora Titan despite the detrimental effects to its mobility!

This was a very risky choice considering that Ves already designed the original Aurora Titan to the maximum acceptable limit to him! Making the mech any heavier would cause it to lose too much mobility for it to be worthwhile to field!

"We replaced and added a few more components to expand the mass limit of the mech." Oscar DiMartin explained. "Even though you told us you want to keep the changes to the minimum, we decided that it would do our variant some good if we replaced some older components with some of the newer equivalents corresponding to the new mech generation."

Though he was a decade older than Ves, the Ylvainan still addressed the Journeymen with utmost deference, because that was what they deserved!

Though the second design team's decision sounded a little presumptuous, at least they were able to make good use out of the new components.

Overall, the variant they designed increased many of the parameters of the base model without sacrificing too much in return.

The most significant price they paid was making the mech vastly more expensive as Ves would have to license a bunch of new components in order to gain the right to incorporate them in the updated version of the Aurora Titan.

"Your team completely disregarded frugality in upgrading the Aurora Titan." Ves ascertained. "It's like you guys acted that you have an unlimited bank account at your disposal. While I admit that it is barely acceptable in this case, you should really pay more attention to cost and efficiency next time."

Ves was willing to squander quite a lot of money if it helped Jannzi become more relevant in battle and increase her odds of advancement.

"I see you have opted to keep the mobility of the mech as even as possible while taking advantage of the expanded limits by augmenting its defense. Why have you opted to strengthen its advantages as opposed to shoring up its weaknesses."

"Ah, we failed to solicit Miss Jannzi Larkinson's opinions, but we thought that a space knight specialist such as her would always appreciate any changes that enhanced the primary function of her mech. We considered the option of expanding the mech's mobility, but the gains aren't significant enough to make the mech more useful. It will always be a fairly slow and sluggish mech."

"It doesn't matter how fast a snail can move. It can never outpace a rabbit." Gloriana remarked. "That said, I understand the other side of the argument as well. The Aurora Titan is really too slow."



Ves didn't object to this decision. The Aurora Titan had always been based around the concept of extreme defense. While it was less versatile and applicable than conventional space knights, he never intended it to be used in a normal fashion.

"This variant improves upon most of the primary functions of the original design." He said. "When mech designers receive an assignment to upgrade a mech, they should always assume the client or end user wishes to maintain the identity of the older version. This is the safest and most straightforward approach you can take when it isn't possible or convenient to solicit feedback from the relevant people."

"We thought so as well, sir." Oscar said. "We had faith in your design concept. Since you deliberately designed the Aurora Titan to be so skewed towards defense at the cost of offense and mobility, we should honor your intentions and do our best to retain your original design choices."

Ves twitched his mouth. The second design team mostly consisted of Ylvainans, who possessed an extremely high devotion towards the 'Bright Martyr'.

In their eyes, Ves was never wrong! Each of his designs were holy products blessed by the Great Prophet himself!

"As good as you think I am, I'm not a match for a Senior or Master." He told them. "My mechs are far from the ideal that Gloriana and I like them to be. There is always a way to improve our mechs. We can even reconsider some of our design choices in light of new possibilities or an expanded vision."

He wasn't sure whether the Ylvainans accepted his message or not. Their admiring eyes towards him hadn't fluctuated at all as he tried to steer them towards a heavier mindset.

Oh, well. At least two out of six of the mech designers of the second design team were not as deluded.

"Mayer Torto, Merrill Truman, what do you think about our work?"

The two sole non-Ylvainans in the second design team had been standing back for separate reasons.

Mayer Torto might be a brilliant graduate of an elite design university, but he was just a Novice Mech Designer right now.

As for Merrill Truman, though she possessed a lot more life experience, her unclean background made it difficult for her to fit in with her more orthodox colleagues.

Mayer, the youngest of the two, spoke first.

"I haven't been able to be of much use in this instance. I still need to catch up and improve my foundation. My specialty hasn't been of much use either. Your mechs lack an enhanced command, communication and control system that is customary in military mech designs."

Ves nodded in acknowledgement. "Most of my mechs are aimed towards private sector usage. In general, most outfits don't have any heavy demands in this area. Communication is rudimentary and coordination is haphazard at best. It's overkill to add advanced communication systems to our mechs."

"Will that still be the case for the mechs intended for your own mech pilots?" Mayer questioned. "From what I've learned, the mech pilots of your Larkinson Clan are mostly up to military standard. They have the discipline and training to perform advanced tactics and formations that most outfits eschew."

The young recruit actually had a very good point. When it came to commercial mech designs, it wasn't wrong for him to stick to his original stance, but if he designed a mech for his own people, he could do more.

"We'll talk later about this subject in private, Mayer. I'm interested to hear your thoughts. For now, let's resume our evaluation of your work."

The second variant may have succeeded in elevating the performance of the original Aurora Titan, but that was mostly due to the vastly improved armor plating and other replacements.

In other words, the Ylvaine Design Team forcibly elevated the performance of the mech by taking advantage of much better and much more expensive tech and materials.

There wasn't anything wrong with that. Ves resorted to this approach a couple of times as well.

The bigger issue was that the Second Design Team hadn't paid enough attention to refining their implementation. The sloppiness of their work not only reflected their limited design capabilities, but also a lack of attentiveness towards maximizing efficiency.

Ves already anticipated the former, but he was not as tolerant of the latter!

In fact, Gloriana had a bigger problem with regards to this issue!

"Your team has implemented too many changes! That's not a problem in itself, but each alteration results in a series of other shifts. Don't you realize how misaligned the mech has become due to the cascade of changes?" She complained.

"We thought we had it under control."

"It's not good enough! None of you see this mech the way we do! If you possess our depth, you wouldn't have been so eager to alter so many variables at the same time!"

"Don't fix it if it ain't broke." Ves spoke. "Some of the 'upgrades' your team has implemented only result in minor improvements in performance, yet the disruption they have caused to the alignments of other components is very significant. While I can tell you did your best in remedying the side effects, you should have reconsidered whether it was worthwhile to make these changes."

The Ylvaine Design Team possessed an abundance of enthusiasm, but lacked restraint.

Part of it was the fault of the team leader. Ves expected too much from Oscar DiMartin, who supposedly worked for several other Ylvainan mech designers in a team environment.

"We are not accustomed to performing our work with this degree of autonomy." The man explained. "We were faced with an abundance of choice and not a lot of guidance to focus our creative efforts."

That was a reasonable argument. Though Gloriana thought that they should have known better, Ves didn't think it was a big deal.

They could address all of these issues over time. Exposing these problems was part of the test. It was better for Ves and Gloriana to find out about them now than later when they were in the middle of a crucial project.

Overall, though the execution left a lot to be desired, Ves truly liked the second variant more. Instead of trying to alter his vision, the work of the Ylvaine Design Team stayed true to his original intentions.

Naturally, that didn't mean that Ves was ready to adopt it wholesale. Once the feedback session came to an end, he clapped in order to gather everyone's attention.

"Alright, I'm generally satisfied with your efforts. I'll be taking your variants and borrow from them as needed to design my own revision of the Aurora Titan design. Many of you have come up with at least some good ideas that I don't mind seeing in Jannzi's upgraded mech. I'll properly credit all of you for your contributions."

While the mech designers received a mix of praises and criticism, the latter cut the deepest.

Humans were always more sensitive towards attacks rather than compliments. While Ves had tried to be even in his feedback, his subordinate mech designers acted as if 95 percent of his words consisted of direct attacks!

Dealing with feedback in a mature fashion was a struggle for any creator. When they poured their entire hearts into a creation, it was natural to feel offended when some critic scorched their earnest efforts.

However, that was no excuse for them to ignore the value of negative feedback. Even if someone hurled tons of personal insults at them, as long as a critic had a point, it should never be discounted out of hand!

Of course, whether a mech designer actually decided to change course as a result of someone's complaints was another matter. Some issues concerned differences in style or differences in taste. A mech designer shouldn't be so eager in pleasing the loudest voices because they risked losing their way.

Fortunately, this problem was not acute as both Ves and Gloriana mainly stuck to pointing out mistakes that the lower-ranking mech designers absolutely should have avoided. Addressing them would definitely improve their design work!

Once they dismissed the design teams, Ves turned to Gloriana.

"So what do you think about our design teams so far?"

She frowned. "They're not as good as the design teams that I'm used to back at home."

"That's a given considering how junior they are. They're not as good as us or the mech designers from your home state. We have to make do with what we can get."

"You could have hired some actual Journeyman or Seniors, you know."

"I prefer to raise them from my own ranks." He reminded her. "Hiring more experienced mech designers will boost us in the short term, but it will hobble the LMC's Design Department in the long term. Be patient. Just give it some time. Perhaps some of them will make Journeyman one day!"

"In a century, maybe."

All in all, Ves was happy with what he got. He estimated he could finish his revision for the Aurora Titan in less than a week. This was enough time to overhaul the Shield of Samar so that Jannzi Larkinson would be ready for whatever the sandmen did next!

#### *Chapter 1836 Conflicting Will*

What enabled mech pilots to advance to expert candidates?

What enabled expert candidates to advance to expert pilots?

Ves used to believe it was simple. A mech pilot with spiritual potential, meaning that he possessed more than a significant amount of spiritual energy, developed his strength by undergoing a gradual mental evolution.

As long as a mech pilot found a reason to fight for and devoted his entire will towards this concept, they would eventually grow strong enough to pierce through a veil and become an extraordinary individual!

Yet the story was not as simple as Ves initially thought.

The thin veil that separated an ordinary mech pilot from the realm of expert candidate was a lot thicker than Ves thought.

The same applied to the barrier between expert candidate and expert pilot.

Ves was not a mech pilot. His evolution as a mech designer was not very relevant in this instance. Both mech pilots and mech designers developed in different ways.

The growth trajectory of mech designers didn't include an equivalent to expert candidates. Ves only possessed a rudimentary understanding of this phase. He always figured that it was only a matter of time for candidates to advance to expert pilot.

He wasn't wrong. Not completely.

The chances that an expert candidate broke through to expert pilot was a lot higher than an ordinary mech pilot jumping to expert candidate.

Yet that chance was not equivalent to a guarantee. Later on, Ves learned that plenty of expert candidates failed to make the most important step for whatever reason.

Ves saw that both Jannzi and Tusa had progressed a lot as expert candidates. They polished their rudimentary force of wills into a strong and pure reflection of their fighting spirit.

Yet as exceptional as they appeared to his spiritual senses, he somehow sensed that they lacked a key ingredient that allowed them to break through their bottleneck.

What was it? Were they lacking in stimulation? Was there some sort of flaw in their mental wills? Was their spiritual potential insufficient to support them in their final step?

It made sense if someone like Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson took his time to undergo apotheosis. The man reached expert candidate at a fairly young age and rapidly improved his skills through sheer talent and hard work.

Yet that wasn't enough.

Ves purposefully dubbed the extraordinary by this specific term because they were beyond the ordinary. The implication was that advancing to an extraordinary state required someone to already be exceptional!

It sounded like a chicken and egg problem. For an expert candidate to become an expert pilot, the person in question already needed to replicate the performance of an expert pilot to an extent!

How could that be possible? An expert candidate was called this way because they only possessed the potential of an expert pilot, and not the corresponding power.

"Perhaps the only way to square the circle is through immense external stimuli."

The way Jannzi Larkinson advanced during a non-life-threatening mech exhibition was a very rare exception. Most mech pilots didn't turn into expert candidates by participating in a show. Most mech pilots also didn't enjoy the surreptitious assistance of a Sacred God like Qilanxo.

No. The key was external stimuli. To be more specific, the most 'reliable' method to encourage mech pilots to push themselves beyond their limits was through subjecting them through life-and-death battles!

The more desperate the situation, the greater their need to reach beyond their limits!

This was exactly how an expert candidate like Captain Foster broke through after being persecuted by a super force of Flagrant Vandals!

Not only did the Vandals inadvertently push Relia Foster into a corner, but also gave her the time to hone her force of will into a razor-sharp blade that was deadly enough to propel her to expert pilot!

"Maybe that is what Jannzi and Tusa truly need." Ves muttered. "Keeping them off the battlefield will only result in stagnation."

Mech pilots existed to fight. If they couldn't perform their primary function, why did they need to advance?

Expert pilots only emerged when mech pilots realized their inadequacy and threw their entire weight behind chasing after strength!

Only by wholeheartedly pursuing the strength to increase their chances of survival and bring them closer to achieving their goals would they become worthy enough to shed their mortal shackles!

Ves therefore believed that he should find some way to push Jannzi and Tusa into action sometime in the future. If they failed to make any progress while they were drilling with Larkinsons, then obviously something had to change.

As for Silent William, Ves immediately experienced a headache whenever he thought about him. The mute mech pilot and exile from the Vicious Mountain Star Sector had gained a lot of spiritual potency since Ves 'operated?????' on his spirituality.

Yet the Urbesh clansman remained ordinary as any other mech pilot. His spiritual potential may have ballooned, but it was still largely untapped.

Despite experiencing months of harrowing battles against the sandmen, none of the stimuli caused William Urbesh to form a coherent force of will.

What was the problem? What was taking him so long?

In order to solve this conundrum once and for all, Ves ordered William to report to the lab. Once there, Ves drugged the mech pilot and placed his unconscious body in an enclosed lab.

Since William was by all accounts silent and unresponsive to others, Ves didn't even bother asking questions to him. He would just keep his mouth shut anyway.

"So what are you going to do with him?" Gloriana asked as she stood in the observer's room while holding her cat.

"Miaow."

Clixie wasn't interested in the proceedings. All she cared about was getting pampered by her owner.

"Meow."

Nyaaaa!

Lucky on the other hand was tugging and playing with the Golden Cat. The two had been spending a lot of time together, which wasn't surprising considering Ves lugged the Larkinson Mandate wherever he went.

Right now, Ves placed his book out of the way in order to place his full attention on this problem.

In order to get in the good graces of the Rim Guardians and thereby gain an opportunity to earn a lot more MTA merits, he needed to complete this task of theirs.

Ves thought he already got the largest hurdle out of the way by getting rid of William Urbesh's deep-seethed cowardice.

Yet the spiritual surgery which turned William into an entirely new man also caused his mind and spirituality to split into two!

As Ves concentrated his mind and carefully inspected the unconscious mech pilot's mental state, he ascertained that nothing much had changed since he last performed an inspection.

Around 30 percent of his mind and spirit was occupied by the 'original' William. This was the coward part of him that abhorred any type of confrontation.

Seventy percent consisted of the contaminant that Ves had introduced into the foreigner's mind. This portion came from Nyxie, the ancient alien spiritual entity that was safely locked away inside the Ancient Sarcophagus.

Nyxie was overflowing with attributes related to tyranny, superiority and hostility. These attributes completely canceled out the original William's cowardice and allowed the mech pilot to get over his fear of battle.

In that sense, Ves succeeded in overcoming the first hurdle.

Yet turning William into a competent mech pilot was only half the battle. It was a lot harder to drag a mech pilot into the realm of expert candidate!

Ves had seen so many mech pilots who possessed spiritual potential but never found the opportunity to infuse it into their wills.

Part of it was because they might not possess a sufficient amount of potential. Another part of it was that their will was not receptive enough to accept empowerment.

This might be the primary reason for William's block. It wasn't that he failed to get enough stimulation. The problem instead lay in William's foundation as a person!

Those worthy to transcend mortality needed to possess a strong mind and a focused mind!

A split mind like William's was anything but conducive towards the formation of a force of will!

"The fault lies with me, then." He murmured.

"So can you fix whatever is wrong with him?" Gloriana curiously asked.



She didn't understand much of what Ves was trying to do. She was mainly here because she insisted on witnessing what Ves could do with William.

"I have some ideas."

"Then why haven't you tried them out yet?"

"They're dangerous. Anything that manipulates the mind or spirit is something that inherently changes the essence of an individual. It is too easy to screw up and cause someone's personality to warp. In fact, I've already done that to William. He's essentially a damaged human."

"Well, whatever's wrong, there's one thing I know, Ves. If there's a fault, there's a way to remedy it. Always."

Ves contemplated her words. Of course she would say something like that. Though her advice sounded obvious, it was not that straightforward when it came to spiritual alteration.

Or was it?

Perhaps he was overcomplicating the matter. Maybe messing with someone's mind was similar to messing with a mech. As long as Ves made some purposeful changes, he could achieve the effect he wanted without producing a lot of unintended consequences.

The main reason why he lacked confidence was that Ves possessed too little depth in the field of spiritual engineering and spiritual manipulation.

In other words, he was a wizard when it came to mechs, but a brute when it came to manipulating minds!

This analogy was apt because he was aware that he possessed the power to effect change, but lacked the knowledge and technique to wield it with actual skill.

Sometimes, Ves really wished his mother passed on a manual or a textbook or something. She had been too remiss in educating him in how to utilize his spiritual powers!

Well, he had been doing decently so far. At least he succeeded in utilizing his spirituality in mech design. Now he just needed to gain some proficiency in manipulating mech pilots in order to complete the circle.

Ves briefly described William's mental state to Gloriana. "How would you go about in solving this problem? Mind you, the situation is very delicate, so I need to keep my intervention as light as possible."

"Hmm.." She fell into thought while stroking Clixie's belly. "I would contemplate three different options. The first possible solution is to balance out the two elements. Instead of the thirty seventy split you have now, I would find some way to weaken one and strengthen the other so that a fifty fifty split will form."

"A balance doesn't solve the fundamental problem that a split has occurred in the first place." Ves pointed out. "I suspect that this is the root of the problem."

"I don't know, Ves. You're the expert on this matter. I just think that balance is better than imbalance. Perhaps a surprising change might take place once William's opposite sides become equal to each other. They might cancel each other out or form some sort of harmony that causes them to merge together."

This was pure speculation to Ves. He could not afford to go forward on baseless assumptions. At the very least, a theory had to be backed by solid logic in order to inspire confidence!

"What other guesses do you have?"

"Well, the other option is to tilt the odds until the stalemate breaks. Either the 'cowardly' side of William wins, or the 'Nyxie' side of him takes over."

"No!" Ves forcefully shook his head. "That is taking a step backward. Restoring William's cowardly personality puts us back to the beginning, while allowing Nyxie to take over is unacceptable!"

"Why so?" She tilted her head. "What makes you so afraid of this divine entity? Are you sure that letting him take over results in a bad outcome?"

Her words caused him to revisit his assumptions. He sort of took it for granted that letting Nyxie take over William's mind, spirit and body was a very bad idea, yet why did he believe this to be the case?

Was it just his primal fear for the ancient alien entity talking?

Just thinking about paying another visit to the red coffin practically inspires panic in his being! Allowing Nyxie to extend his reach beyond his primordial prison sounded like a very bad idea! His intuition was practically ringing alarm bells!

"Let's put this suggestion aside." Ves mildly said. "You said you have a third possible solution. What other means can we employ to remove William's block?"

"Well..."

## *Chapter 1837 Living Produc*

Gloriana provided Ves with several suggestions on how to resolve Silent William's inability to advance to expert candidate.

Neither of the options she mentioned so far inspired confidence in Ves. Operating on someone's mind and spirit was an extremely sensitive act that had far-reaching effects on someone's psyche and personality.

He understood far too little about humans and the human mind to consider himself an expert in this field!

Due to his concerns and apprehensions, he found it difficult to come up with solutions on his own. This was why he welcomed the input of an outsider like Gloriana.

Her lack of understanding in the spiritual field aside, her ignorance granted her a fresh and untainted perspective towards the problem Ves was facing.

Sometimes, all it took to solve a complex problem was a simple but novel solution.

Her third suggestion exceeded anything Ves could conceive of on his own! It sounded so radical that his thoughts almost crashed!

"Say again?"

"You heard me." She said as she continued to ruffle Clixie's fur. "You need to solve the separation in William's mind so that both sides are able to blend and coexist as one. Well, doesn't this sound familiar to you? From what you've described to me, the divinity that people like you, me and William possess is identical to the proto-gods you've been working with all along! Aside from the fact that the latter isn't anchored by a corporeal vessel, it doesn't sound like they are fundamentally different from gods in the making such as you, me and every other exceptional mech pilot and mech designer!"

Ves simply couldn't connect the two. Not immediately. Spiritual products were entirely different from high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers!

Were they?

The moment Gloriana threw out this seemingly simple but incredibly radical equation, Ves couldn't help but linger over it. His values and principles as a decent human being recoiled at any suggestion that a human's spirituality could be treated in the same fashion as a spiritual product!

The former was a complete, sentient and living entity, while the other was a product designed and created to fulfill a specific purpose!

Yet.. were design spirits not complete, sentient and alive?

Were humans not 'created' to fulfill some purposes as well, such as procreation and the continuation of their species?

If Ves set aside the perspective of a common human being, then the two actually had a lot more common than he initially assumed.

It was difficult to put human spirituality in the same category as spiritual products. He had been raised as a proper Brighter, and inherited the principles that almost every school instilled in humans.

Human life was precious and deserved to be treated with dignity. It was forbidden to tamper with human minds! Artificially altering human beings in order to 'program' them into different persons was one of the biggest violations of human rights in human space!

This was a crime that would almost certainly provoke the Big Two into squashing him into paste!

Even though Ves learned later on that enforcement was less than rigorous, it was still difficult for Ves to do something that completely crossed the line!

Of course, what Ves had already done to Silent William broke several taboos. Yet he always had William's best interests at heart.

He hadn't tampered with William's mind. He 'cured' the mech pilot by performing a 'benign' spiritual procedure that got rid of one of his 'disorders'.

It worked, didn't it? William turned from an abject coward and a waste of space into a dashing, heroic mech pilot!

Yet what Gloriana suggested was something that went far beyond 'curing' William.

If Ves followed the same methodology he employed whenever he created a spiritual product, then he would have to kill William's spirit before using the remnants to create a new version of him! A different version!

The ethical problems resulting from such a crude and barbaric act were myriad and severe!

Would Ves be erasing the original William beyond the point of no return?

Would the 'spiritual product' that represented the new William bear any connection or resemblance to his old self?

What kind of bonds would the new William maintain with either Ves, Nyxie or some other entity?

How could Ves ensure that the new William still inherited the original William's memories, knowledge and piloting expertise?

Above all, would the new William still bear some resemblance to humanity?

This last question troubled him significantly. Ves inadvertently glanced towards the Larkinson Mandate, which Lucky was using as an impromptu nest.

The Golden Cat he recently brought to life turned into a wholesome feline despite being made from hundreds of different ingredients.

This gave Ves some hope that he could control or at least steer the spiritual restoration process to an extent. As long as he added in enough supplementary ingredients, perhaps he might be able to retain the human-ness of the resulting spiritual product!

Ves began to consider the matter more seriously once he gained some confidence in his ability to achieve the outcome he desired. All thoughts on taboos and ethics went out the window as he was becoming increasingly more consumed by the unlimited potential of this ability!

As long as he succeeded, he would be able to grasp a means of 'reprogramming' human beings! This went beyond the level of brainwashing and indoctrination used by various unsavory and illicit groups!

The only reason he held back from going wild with this idea was that it was largely untested. He didn't have a good grasp on the outcome because he never performed this method on a human before.

He needed to test his theories. He needed to refine this method through practice and repetition. He needed to develop a more solid theoretical framework to gain a better grip on the mechanics behind the process.

All in all, Ves was about to traverse head-first into uncharted territory, and that meant that he could encounter all kinds of dangers in the fog!

Instinctively, a part of him felt deeply repelled by what he was contemplating. The sheer inhumanity of it reminded Ves of the depravities the researchers of the Five Scrolls Compact were willing to commit!

Ves shook his head. He needed to center himself and reaffirm his principles.

The proper course of action was to reject Gloriana's radical but admittedly brilliant suggestion.

Yet.. the potential of it kept luring him back. Though he would never employ such a radical method on someone he cared about like the Larkinsons, it was a different case for a stranger like William Urbesh.

What did it matter if he 'killed' William and resurrected someone new and different in his place? Was it worth sticking to his principles if it was in his best interest to utilize this method to solve a problem that had been bothering for a while?

"I'm not killing him if I do this." He whispered to himself. "I'm reconstructing him. Obviously, my patient isn't of a right mind right now. My earlier treatment failed to restore him to a healthy state. Obviously a follow-up treatment is required."

Of course, Ves conveniently ignored the fact that he was responsible for putting William in such a divisive state in the first place. He also disregarded the implication that he planned to spiritually kill the original William and put a spiritual abomination in his place. He also passed over the fact that he would be violating the principles he was determined to uphold.

Ves had a lot of practice in ignoring his principles when his interests were on the line.

Perhaps he might have to pay a price for that later on, but Ves didn't care right now. The idea he formed was far too intriguing to ignore, and it seemed as if it was his best shot at advancing his relationship with the Rim Guardians!

As long as he completed their mission, Ves would not feel any remorse!

Though this operation sounded extremely risky, Ves was too impatient to bother with trying out this method on test subjects. He already had a decent amount of practice with creating spiritual products, and this shouldn't be any different! Gloriana was right that human spirituality was little different from the design spirits he worked on a daily basis. Qilanxo even used to be a real living exobeast before she transcended into a purely spiritual existence!

"Let's perform this experiment right away!" He grinned as he became more enthused by the possibilities. "I'll have to retrieve some objects and make some preparations."

He began to bring over a P-stone, F-stone and B-stone lockbox from the vault. He primarily wanted to have a charged P-stone by his side in order to compensate and supplement his spiritual energy expenditure.

As for the F-stone and B-stone lockbox, Ves just wanted to keep them close as a precaution.

If he somehow managed to birth an eldritch horror, he might have to borrow the F-stone's offensive amplification charge to slay the spiritual monster.

The B-stone lockbox could be put to use in a variety of ways, such as using it as an improvised helmet to defend himself against direct spiritual attacks.

Once he brought these objects to the lab chamber, he began to sit and create some empowered spiritual images.

Just like with his other spiritual products, these spiritual images basically functioned like blueprints. At least that was what he hoped.

It seemed to work out the last time. When Ves created the Golden Cat, the resulting spiritual product matched the image of a cat he formed.

Even though Ves hadn't created a perfect image that contained a complete library of cat-related properties, the Golden Cat still behaved perfectly like one!

This meant that Ves didn't need to be too specific or thorough in constructing an image of Silent William as an 'ideal' mech pilot.

Intent and purpose mattered more than precision when it came to spirituality!

That, and the ingredients mattered a lot as well, but Ves already had that covered. He did not intend to blend in anything aside from the split portions of spirituality in William's mind.

It wasn't as if he was tempted to steal an expert pilot's spiritual fragment and throw it into the mix, but Ves was afraid this would only result in a detrimental outcome.

Since he was doing something very new, it was best to keep it simple and keep out as many variables as possible.

While Ves worked to prepare his upcoming operation, Gloriana sat quietly while peppering him with questions whenever he took a small break.

"Are you confident you'll succeed?" She asked with curious eyes.

"I am." He answered. "Though I'm not certain what will happen, my intuition tells me that this is a sound idea. At the very least, the logic of it is solid. It's the details that concern me. The added variable of manipulating a human's spirituality to such a drastic degree will doubtlessly result in complications."

"The devil is in the detail." Gloriana remarked. "Sometimes, the smallest variables have a way to completely upend your expectations. Make sure you are ready to respond to any unexpected developments."

"I know."

"Do you need my help? Since you're performing another miracle, my assistance can improve the outcome."

Ves immediately shook his head. "No thanks. You still haven't recovered from your involvement in the creation of the Golden Cat. I don't want to prolong your weak state any further. I need you back to normal as fast as possible so you can fully participate in my Larkinson mech design project."

"So the life of a human being is less valuable than a mech design to you?"

"Yup." Ves answered without hesitation. "Especially when that 'human being' is just some random schmuck and the mech design in question plays an extremely vital role in the evolution of the Larkinson Clan! There is no question which one is more important!"

Gloriana looked amused. "If you say so. Aren't you afraid that William.. won't come out right after you are done with him? Without my ability to fix imperfections, you're going to produce a very flawed product."

"It doesn't matter. I'm not aiming to create a perfect living product. As long as the new William is human enough to pass for one and retains most of his skill and knowledge in piloting mechs, then I have no complaints!"

Whatever collateral damage or side effects Ves produced over the course of his operation was not his concern! So long as they didn't impact the new William's advancement to expert candidate, then the operation was a success in his book!

#### *Chapter 1838 Correctional Surgery*

Ves finished his preparations for his upcoming 'correctional' surgery.

He prepared all of his props, including the spiritually-empowered images which would hopefully shape the development of his latest 'spiritual product'.

In general, Ves tried to keep them simple in order to minimize the occurrence of complications.

"What can go wrong will go wrong." He explained to Gloriana. "While that doesn't necessarily translate well to single instances, it's best to minimize the damage by exposing as little vulnerabilities as possible."

"So you've decided to build off William's existing traits and personality rather than take a heavier hand in reconstructing his personality."

"That's right. I'm reducing the difficulty as much as possible and making it so that I can let the process occur as organically as possible."



This meant that his image of the new William corresponded a lot with William's current state.

The new William should be mute and uncommunicative.

The new William should be a calculating but also courageous mech pilot.

The new William yearns for greater power in order to bring the Urbesh Clan from the brink of dissolution.

The new William ought to be a good team player in battle despite his lack of communication.

All of this 'spiritual programming' corresponded to either the original William or his Nyxie side. Ves just wanted to emphasize the more desirable aspects in order to make sure they transferred to the spiritual product that took over his test subject's mind and body.

He only introduced a couple of original programming in order to achieve some necessary goals.

First, he added in an image which emphasized that William was a completely functional and normal human being.

Even if he turned out to be a spiritual abomination, then at least he shouldn't behave abnormally! Licking other people's arms for no reason or developing a penchant for devouring human flesh was an instant giveaway that something was very wrong with William!

The next set of programming was meant to keep William silent on matters that Ves didn't want to leak. Every memory related to spirituality, mind operations and all this stuff should hopefully disappear from the new William! Even if that wasn't possible, the spiritual product should at least keep his mouth shut!

Ves believed he should be able to get away with these minor additions.

He thought about adding some sort of compulsion to be completely loyal to him, but that was too much intervention. Such an alteration was too large and disruptive, resulting in significant complications that might warp the new William into an entirely different entity!

It was also unnecessary.

"Every spiritual product I've made so far is already predisposed to respect me and look up to me." He explained. "They are all my children in a sense, and each of them regard me as their parent. A significant portion of my spiritual energy runs through their spiritual makeup, as it is necessary to provide them with the spark of life. I think I can rely on this interaction to keep William honest."

"If the new William really ends up like your other spiritual product, then he'll return to a newborn state, at least from a mental aspect." Gloriana pointed out.

"We'll just have to raise him over again. I intend to hand him over to the Larkinsons with the excuse that he suffered from some sort of weird mental trauma that caused him to suffer from amnesia."

"The Larkinsons aren't stupid, Ves. The Avatars have fought alongside William for months during the Sand War. They'll definitely start to wonder why he's completely different."

"I'll do my best to encourage them to cease asking questions." He frowned. "As long as they know what is good for them, they'll stop poking into matters that aren't any of their business."

"Will the Larkinsons be able to train William to the point where he's both a functional human and an expert candidate in time for the deadline of your mission?"

Ves wasn't employing the new William as a design spirit, so he wouldn't progress like his other spiritual products.

This meant that the new William would likely take longer to mature, but Ves believed it was okay. He still had some time left before the deadline approached.

What Ves cared more was whether William would be able to break through to expert candidate in time!

There shouldn't be any problems related to his spiritual potential. It had already grown quite sizable after Nyxie contaminated William's spirituality.

The key and the point of this entire operation was to achieve a unified, coherent mind that was conducive towards the formation of a force of will.

"I forgot about this!" Ves slapped his forehead.

He didn't want to perform a very dangerous operation only to gain nothing in the end! If the new William failed to merge his spiritual potential with his will, then Ves might have well not bothered in the first place!

He halted and tried to think what kind of value, principle or emotion William should adopt as his *raison d'être*.

Perhaps it wasn't necessary for Ves to make this choice on his test subject's behalf, but he wanted to minimize as much uncertainty as possible.

He couldn't afford his test subject spending years or decades to explore his true self! Skipping this potentially-lengthy process insured that Ves would be able to achieve quick results!

"I'll have to make a choice that best conforms to William's new personality." He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "One that is powerful enough to make him dedicate his whole life towards."

What did William fight for? Ves actually didn't know. He never bothered questioning the mech pilot properly after he went mute.

Prying answers from a man that wanted to stay uncommunicative was an exercise in futility.

As Ves gazed at his unconscious test subject, he suddenly snapped his fingers. "I don't need to ask him! I'll just lift the answer straight out of his mind!"

Ves proceeded to concentrate and delve into William's unconscious mind and spirituality.

He was already familiar with the division between the original William and the presence of Nyxie. What Ves wanted to do was investigate their respective motivations.

It wasn't difficult to figure out their motivations. The original William wanted to become a powerful mech pilot and be worthy of leading the Urbesh Clan back to power. This was something every mech pilot from the Garlen Empire dreamed of, especially those born into clans and tribes!

As for Nyxie, the ancient alien's motivations were kind of obvious. The alien wanted nothing more than to restore himself to power and dominate the galaxy or something.

"The two aren't exactly the same, but there might be a way for one to feed the other."

Both of them wanted to gain power. Ves preferred the new William to steer his drive towards a more healthy direction such as trying to gain power in the martial-oriented Garlen Empire.

The last thing Ves wanted to see was to create a monstrous butcher in human skin that proceeded to use his extraordinary power to kill as many humans possible!

"I think I know what to do now."

He proceeded to alter and tweak some of the images he made to emphasize this aspect of the original William as much as possible. In fact, Ves might have gone overboard and exaggerated this desire, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing!

As opposed to mech designers who developed a distortion in their personalities as a side effect of their progression, mech pilots needed to develop a strong obsession before they took their first step to godhood!

It was kind of odd how mirrored they were. Who came up with the methods to advance as mech pilots and mech designers? They certainly didn't appear out of thin air shortly after the formation of the Mech Trade Association!

Ves shook his head. This wasn't the time to consider these matters. He had a spiritual procedure to perform.

"There. That should do it. This is as good a motivation as any for a Garlaner."

He wanted to warp the new William into developing an obsession for power. The mech pilot's ultimate goal was not just to restore the Urbesh Clan to power, but also advance to ace pilot and become eligible to succeed as the emperor of the mighty Garlen Empire!

With such an ambitious goal in mind, Ves did not believe that the new William would slack off in his advancement!

"Do you think I've covered everything?" He asked his girlfriend.

She shrugged. "I don't know, but I think you've covered everything that's necessary. It's up to you now to transform William into a mech pilot that can make his clan proud. Prove your worth as a god in the making and a giver of life!"

Ves directed an unamused expression towards her. "Don't be so melodramatic. I'm not a god and I'm not creating life out of nothing."

"I know you can do it! Go on! Make an expert candidate out of William!" She cheered and acted as if Ves didn't say anything!

He gave up on her and focused his attention on William. He made sure to check if the sedates would still keep him unconscious. The last thing he wanted to see was William waking up and screaming murder!

Once he made sure that William was under control and the lab chamber was fully isolated and enclosed, Ves mustered up his spiritual strength and began his operation!

"First step! Shatter the ingredients!"

This was a hard step. Ves had to force himself to think of William as a spiritual product instead of an actual human being!

The moment he did so, Ves felt as if he had crossed a point of no return. Once he took this step, he would never be able to regain the shred of innocence he lost today.

"It's for a good cause!"

He pushed aside all of his doubts and resolutely employed his superior spiritual strength to shatter the split spirituality of Silent William!

Different from a partial and incomplete spiritual fragment, the whole spirituality of a living human being was intrinsically stronger and more durable. However, Ves was so much stronger that he could easily resort to brute force to shatter William's spirit!

The moment he did so, William's unconscious and restrained body buckled as if it had been stabbed in the heart!

An extremely essential part of him had perished! Though his body and mind were still sound and untouched, without a functioning spirit, he was no better off than a clone!

Ves needed to move quickly to minimize the consequences of this crude operation. He shattered the spiritually-empowered images he made before blending the pieces with the shards of Silent William's spirit.

After that, he quickly proceeded to merge the pieces back together. It was just as if he was creating a regular spiritual product like Bravo or the Solemn Guardian.

The fact that the process of piecing together a living human's spirit was no different from creating a spiritual product disturbed Ves on a profound level.

Was Gloriana truly right? Were humans no different from products on a spiritual level?

Whatever the case, the fact that there weren't any significant deviations in the process was also a blessing. The chance of complications should be low as long as nothing came and messed with the operation!

Just as Ves started to relax and settle into a routine, he suddenly noticed a presence that wasn't there before!

Ves honed his spiritual senses towards the new presence and realized that an unwelcome guest had butted into the process at some point!

"What the hell is this?! What is it doing?!"

The new spiritual entity was small but surprisingly concentrated. Not only that, it was doing something to the forming spiritual product that wasn't in his plan!

Ves diverted a spiritual projection to shove it outside William's mind, only for him to fail!

This tiny, concentrated presence was extremely difficult to deal with! Not only that, but Ves recognized its spiritual flavor!

"Cassandra Breyer!" He uttered in shock, attracting a confused glance from his girlfriend! "Damn it! Can't you just stay put like the mummy you are?! Get out of my experiment!"

*Chapter 1839 Spiritual Shortcu*

Cassandra Breyer!

The strange undead woman interfered with William's 'Corrective Surgery' at the exactly wrong moment!

Just when Ves was making good progress in resurrecting and reconstructing his shattered spirit, the uninvited meddling of a third-party threatened to ruin his arrangements!

A small but highly-concentrated spiritual projection was messing about with the shards and merged amalgamations, altering them in some indescribable fashion.

No matter what she was doing, it was almost certainly bad!

Ves wanted her to be gone!

"GET OUT!"

He paused his work in reconstructing William's spirit in order to bring his full strength to bear against the intruder. The longer Cassandra messed around, the greater the degree of distortion in the end product!

There were too many cooks in the kitchen. This entire procedure was his show from the start, and he absolutely couldn't tolerate anyone barging in to mess with his creation, especially from a hostile witch like Cassandra Breyer!

He tried to dislodge the intruding spiritual projection several times, yet all of his attempts failed!

The frustrating part of this was that Ves knew he could bring much more strength to bear. Yet Cassandra's seemingly small and weak spiritual projection withstood his brute force attacks as if it was holding an umbrella against the rain!

His heart sank as he ascertained the reason why he failed.

Her spiritual application and technique was far superior to his own! Instead of forming a solid projection, it instead consisted of countless tiny building blocks that chained and meshed together in incredibly complex abstruse patterns that reminded Ves of circuitry.

Such an arrangement bespoke of an extremely deep proficiency in spiritual engineering, the likes of which went far beyond Ves could ever conceive on his own! The disparity between his simple spiritual mallet and Cassandra's incredibly refined spiritual probe was too much!

Ves darkened even further. Did he have to expend some of his F-stone's offensive charge in order to destroy this interloper?

Though he was sure that Cassandra wasn't strong enough to withstand its destructive power, Ves was very hesitant about wasting the F-stone's remaining potency!

Having found no other spiritually-reactive exotic like it, Ves wanted to preserve it as a trump card against truly implacable foes. Right now, using it on something that he should have been able to defeat on his own was an incredible waste!

"I guess I'll fall back to the stupid option then. I don't believe you can withstand my attacks forever!"

If a certain amount of brute force didn't work, then Ves could always employ it again! And again! And again!

Just like how mech armor designed to withstand laser fire would eventually succumb to a bombardment of lasers, Ves believed that Cassandra's defenses still incurred at least some damage with every hit! Total immunity didn't exist in mechs, so it shouldn't exist in the spiritual arena either!

His spiritual energy expenditure increased enormously as he kept hammering and stabbing Cassandra's unusually resilient spiritual probe like crazy. William Urbesh's half-constructed spirit started to stagnate and regress due to being neglected. It didn't help that Ves was acting like a bull in a china shop and tore up some of the surrounding spiritual shards!

He didn't care about the collateral damage right now. All that mattered to him was eliminating this uncontrollable outside factor before it ruined his entire experiment!

Though Ves drew on his P-stone energy reserves like he was thirsty, his efforts finally achieved the desired effect!

At some point, his attacks caused Cassandra's probe to reach a limit! Like an egg, it finally popped and leaked a scattered and unregulated amount of spiritual energy all over William's mind!

Unfortunately, before Ves could clean up the mess, the scattered energy all sank into the loose spiritual shards, merging with them to such a degree it was impossible to dig them out!

"Damnit!"

This was another trap! Even if Cassandra failed to finish her targeted manipulation, she still managed to secure a consolation prize by merging a part of her spiritual influence in William's spirituality!

At this moment, Ves faced a very unattractive prospect. He was half-way through the spiritual restoration process that he could not afford to pause or stop.

Doing nothing or halting the process would quickly degrade the quality and integrity of the spiritual shards.

If Ves decided to try again later, he would have much worse ingredients to work with! Right now, they were still relatively fresh, but if he wanted to try again, the ingredients would have certainly spoiled and rotted by then! He only had one chance to make this right!

"I'm not dealing with a regular spiritual product either. I'm working on a real human life here!"

What would happen to William Urbesh if his body lacked the necessary spirituality? Would Ves still be able to merge William's reconstructed spirituality back to his body if he delayed the matter by a couple of days?

Ves didn't know the answers to these questions, but he could not afford to be reckless on this front.

His keen sense of risk told him that it would be best if he proceeded with the operation as best as possible regardless of the uncontrollable variables that Cassandra introduced.

As an artist and a creator, this was a profoundly awful decision to make. Ves felt as if he spent a lot of time to cool a meal for himself, only for one of his enemies to dump an entire cup of sugar on his casserole!

Would he still be able to stomach the finished product after it had been tampered with to such an extent?

Unfortunately, eating something excessively sweet was better than going hungry!

"What a devious plan, Cassandra. I guess you win this time."



Ves was in a bad mood throughout the remainder of the session. He tried his best to separate his emotions from his work and ensure that William's spirit received the best care possible.

It was difficult.

His patience frayed and he was reaching the limits to his tolerance. His distaste in integrating spiritual shards that had been contaminated with a hint of Cassandra's spirituality sat very poorly with him. If possible, Ves vastly preferred to throw away these contaminated shards!

If Ves was creating an ordinary spiritual product, then he would have done so without another thought.

"I can't do that here. I'm not creating something new that begins from scratch. I'm trying to rebuild a human who already exists!"

It was vitally important for Ves to retain as many shards as possible! Any loss, however minor, might have devastating effects on the new William Urbesh!

What if Ves discarded a spiritual shard that was related to his ability to pilot mechs? If William's mech piloting ability incurred damage, then how could he possibly advance to expert candidate?!

Cassandra's scheme went deep. She made it so that Ves had no choice but to accept the tainted ingredients. Regardless of the trap it represented, Ves had no choice but to dive head-in because any other alternative was worse!

Though Ves felt like changing his mind and giving up several times, William's importance to his future plans were far too great for him to quit while he was at this stage!

As Ves breathed more life to William's recomposing spirituality, he finally noticed something remarkable.

Each of his spiritual products always started off on a relatively strong footing compared to other young and underdeveloped spiritual entities.

This was mostly due to the vast amount of energy contained in either the ingredients or the catalyst that Ves provided with his spiritual energy.

The ordinary process of creating spiritual products already injected them with a significant amount of spiritual energy.

The special part about this was that at the moment of creation, there was no rejection. The developing product absorbed any and all sources of spirituality, regardless of how much it conflicted with another source of spirituality!

This was why the shards originating from the cowardly side of William managed to merge seamlessly with the shards from Nyxie's aggressive and domineering side!

What Ves found notable was that aside from the fusion of these two elements, the contribution from both Ves and Cassandra also added into the mix! Aside from contributing some of their spiritual attributes, they mainly gifted the product with a huge amount of spiritual energy!

Both of them contributed in different ways.

Ves provided a large quantity of relatively low-quality spiritual energy. He may not be as evolved as more developed spiritual entities such as Qilanxo and Cassandra, but he had a lot of excess spiritual energy at his disposal!

In contrast, Cassandra only had a tiny amount of spiritual energy at her disposal. Yet the quality of her spiritual energy was so high that its addition soon caused the product's overall quality to grow!

The ultimate result of all of these factors was that William's reconstructed spirit was actually at least an order of magnitude stronger!

"There's more!"

As long as the creation process was still underway, Ves had extensive access to the incomplete product!

He could alter or tamper with any details he wanted! The only problem was that he lacked the knowledge and expertise to know what he was doing most of the time. He wasn't like Cassandra Breyer who was probably capable of making very targeted alterations.

That meant that it wasn't a good idea for him to attempt to reprogram the spiritual shards. It was like trying to mess with the operating system of a mech when he wasn't familiar with the programming language.

"This doesn't apply to everything! There are still some areas that I'm familiar with! I have to make the most out of this temporary period where I'm in complete control!"

Ves suddenly made a very sudden realization. Right now, he was attempting to reforge William's spirituality so that it could support the formation of a force of will.

Why should he wait for the new William to form a force of will when Ves could do it himself? If he acted right away and manipulated William's spirituality to form an appropriate force of will, wouldn't he be able to complete the Rim Guardian Fraternity's mission right away?

His eyes lit up. "This might be a reliable way to create expert candidates!"

Of course, this wasn't quite what he was looking for. Shattering someone's spiritual potential before trying to reconstruct it with an infusion of his spiritual energy would definitely warp someone's personality until they became an entirely different person.

Ves could never bring himself to subject the likes of Melkor Larkinson, Dietrich Krotz and other family or friends to such barbaric treatment!

Everything had a price, and in this case it was way too high.

"Fortunately, it's always someone else who has to pay the greatest price." He smirked.

This meant that this method was still acceptable to mech pilots he didn't particularly care about such as William Urbesh!

Ves focused on turning William into an expert candidate ahead of time.

He recalled the time where Qilanxo forcibly elevated Eloise Pelican from someone who was close to reaching expert candidate into a very potent expert pilot. He replicated some of the methods he witnessed that time and employed his own amateur experiences in imitating a force of will.

It wasn't actually very complicated. Ves just had to grab William's spiritual energy and try and fuse it with his strongest will, emotion or thought.

At this advanced stage in the process, the nearly-complete spiritual product was already starting to connect and affect William's unconscious mind and body.

Since Ves had distorted William's spirituality into developing an obsession for the pursuit of strength, his mind soon started to produce a long of thoughts related to this ambition.

"This is quite convenient!"

His earlier preparation paid off. Ves soon identified enough of William's new obsession and forcibly blended his spiritual energy in it! Though the method was extremely crude and very forced, the inherent compatibility between the two soon sparked a fusion.

William Urbesh finally achieved the goal he always dreamed of. He became an expert candidate!

The only caveat was that Ves wasn't sure how much of the old William would be left by the time he next woke up...

*Chapter 1840 Job Well Done*

Ves practically collapsed onto a seat once he finally completed William's corrective surgery.

The process had been anything but uneventful!

Though plenty of steps proceeded exactly according to his expectations, the sudden intrusion of Cassandra Breyer and the discovery that he could form a force of will for his test subject in advance came as two massive surprises.

He reflected on his actions and experiences. He grabbed hold of the Larkinson Mandate and used its reassuring spiritual warmth as a source of comfort.

Nyaaa.

The Golden Cat brushed against his hand as if she wanted to make him happy. Though weary, Ves nonetheless channeled a small amount of his Spirituality in his hand in order to scratch the young ancestral spirit's head.

"Hehe. You're too cute."

While Ves came to his senses, Gloriana sat down next him and looked at him in concern.

"I'm not entirely sure what went on just now, but it seems to me that William's treatment didn't go according to plan."

He huffed. "That's putting it lightly."

"You yelled something about 'Cassandra'." His girlfriend studied him carefully. "Do you mind telling me who she is and how she interfered?"

Uh oh.

Did he mention her name out loud? He and his stupidly loose tongue. He did not wish to reveal the existence of the mysterious escape pod and its mummified occupant to his girlfriend!

Though he trusted her to some extent, he did not wish for her to get overly snoop and investigate the Scarlet Rose in person, thereby drawing the attention of the rest of the Hexers!

Once the Hexers found out that the former Fridayman ship possessed the ability to churn out a continuous amount of Breyer alloy, they would definitely take her away!

"He decided to go for a mix of truth and falsehood.

"Cassandra isn't who you think she is." He said as plainly as possible while he was still recovering from his mental exertion. "She's a powerful but homeless spirituality energy I bumped into when I was still running from the Coalition Reserve Corps. Her real body is a dried, mummified corpse that has been drifting through interstellar space for at least a century. I never wanted anything to do with this ugly witch!"

His disparaging description of Cassandra managed to melt Gloriana's jealousy. She could sense that he was being honest with his disgust towards the spiritual sorceress.

"So if I get this right, a wandering wraith or god has been haunting you since you escape captivity?"

Ves nodded. "That's right. I keep beating this strange witch back, but she keeps harassing me! It's annoying because I don't know a thing about her or why she sought me out in the first place. Whatever her motivations, I'm certain it's bad news!"

"It sounds like Cassandra is a very clear threat to you." She frowned. "Unfortunately, I don't know any methods to repel these kinds of wraiths. How do you plan to deal with this threat?"

"I already have a countermeasure in mind. It will take a lot of time to develop it though. Right now, I'm too busy with other priorities to build up my spiritual defenses."

He tried to be as vague as possible and quickly changed the subject before she inquired any further.

"It's not all that bad. Despite the bumps along the way, I think William has turned out right. Mostly."

"Did you succeed?"

"We'll have to wake him up and determine his new personality to be sure, but from a spiritual perspective, he's better than ever!"

"Oh? Did you manage to resolve the contradiction between the two sides?"

Ves nodded. "That and more. Actually, I found out that I could do even more during the procedure. If I did everything right and my theory pans out, then it's possible that I managed to turn him to expert candidate while I was reconstructing his spirituality!"

It took a brief moment for Gloriana to process his words. She started to look increasingly shocked at him! As far as she knew, a reliable method of producing expert candidates, the precursor to expert pilot, didn't exist!

Not even the Terrans and Rubarthans cracked the code! They poured an endless amount of money and resources to figure out a reliable and practical way to produce expert candidates, but the best answer they came up with was to subject their mech pilots to brutally harsh training programs designed to stimulate as much potential out of them as possible!

Even then, the success rate of those crazy training programs was miniscule!

Naturally, there were rumors that the MTA and certain organizations from the first-rate states managed to discover a method as well, but hardly anyone believed in these conspiracy theories.

In any case, if Ves truly discovered a reliable, practical and repeatable method to transform regular mech pilots into expert candidates, then he would definitely become one of the hottest people in the galaxy!

A brilliant smile bloomed on her face. The more her boyfriend dazzled her, the happier she became! The power he developed was definitely enough to benefit them in many ways as long as they used it wisely!

Ves watched her changing impression with concern. "Don't misunderstand, Gloriana. While it's technically possible for me to turn a normal mech pilot into an expert candidate, for now the price is too much to bear."

"Oh? Do tell."

He gestured towards William's resting body in the testing chamber. "Just like how I create my other spiritual products, I need to kill the mech pilot's spirit before using the pieces to create a new one. Would you ever want that to happen to your brother Brutus or someone else you care about?"

She realized the downsides of this procedure. "Oh. You're right. I would rather keep my friends and family mortal than to kill their nascent divinities in order to birth a new but unfamiliar god!"

"It's not a given that the new William is completely unrelated to the old one." He speculated. "Different from spiritual products that start from scratch, a reconstructed spirit like the one I made for William will merge with his mind and body. The memories, instincts and other impulses stored in his brain will certainly affect William's spirit just as it exerts influence in turn."

"So the old and new will merge together and result in a personality that sits in between, is that right?"

"That's my prevailing theory right now. We'll have to wake up William and see what he is like to be sure."

They waited a couple of hours for William to wake up on his own accord. Ves refused Gloriana's suggestion to wake him up right away because he could sense that the newly-constructed spirit needed some time to sink into William's body.

It was like watching a parasite latch onto William's mind and body. There was something vague foreign and out of sync about William's new spirit.

Due to this incompatibility, the spirit had to slowly ease back into place in order to buy time for both sides to reconcile with each other.

The spirit affected the mind and the mind affected the spirit.

Both of them altered each other as Ves had predicted. However, the spirit of an expert candidate was vastly stronger than William's unevolved mind. This caused William to interpret and process his memories, emotions and motivations in a significantly different light!

Ves observed this transformation taking place in real time. While he wasn't good enough to understand the particulars, he was still able to ascertain that the fit between the different elements increased due to the spirit imposing itself onto the weaker spirit and body!

"Brain activity is increasing. There's a lot going on inside William's head." Gloriana reported as she kept her eye on the active lab console. "I'd say the level of activity is very concerning for someone who is supposed to be unconscious."

"This process shouldn't take much longer. The mating process has almost finished." He said.

Once the differences between the different elements had been narrowed, the changes petered off. Ves saw that William's mind, body and spirit all managed to form a tight, mutually-reinforcing bond!

The main adaptation process should have finished!

While Ves noticed that smaller transformations still took place, he no longer wanted wait.

He needed to wake his test subject so he could ascertain the results himself!

"Wake him up, please."

Gloriana manipulated the console and commanded the testing chamber to inject some chemicals in William's body.

Several indicators signalled that William was rapidly gaining lucidity. He soon opened his eyes and stared blankly at the empty ceiling of the testing chamber.

Five whole minutes passed by in complete silence. Ves and Gloriana waited with baited breath for William to do something.

Though the lab console continued to transmit all kinds of activity, William himself did not move or speak up at all!

"..Is he defective?" Gloriana asked, her puzzlement evident on her pretty face.

"I don't believe so. His new personality ought to be very taciturn. Staying silent is his natural state."

Though William's new personality seemed problematic, so far Ves was not concerned with how much humanity his test subject retained.

Instead, Ves directed an increasing amount of attention on William's nascent force of will!

Initially, it seemed a bit listless and dormant, as if it didn't belong to William.

Only after William's spirit managed to settle in did the force of will become more active. It was as if the unity between mind, body and spirit provided fertile ground for his force of will!

Even then, Ves observed several problematic instances. A force of will was one of the most important expressions of a mech pilot, and it was vitally important that it completely embodied the mech pilot's values and ambitions!

The fact that the force of will that Ves constructed for William failed to integrate completely was a very serious problem.

Fortunately, just like everything else, William's spirit already started to correct for this incompatibility. This time, the process was much slower as the force of will was very difficult to change.

In the end, Ves wasn't sure whether William actually possessed the strength of an expert candidate.

The only way to find out was to stuff William inside a mech!



"Let's enter the chamber and talk to Mr. Urbesh." He suggested. "His mental and spiritual changes have subsided."

Ves and Gloriana entered the testing chamber with their cats in tow. Both of them regarded the restrained mech pilot with wariness. They witnessed the experiment from the side and knew that something was very different about William!

"Miaow?"

"Meow meow."

With Lucky clinging cautiously behind his shoulder, Ves stepped forward until he loomed over his test subject.

"William Urbesh. Do you know who you are?"

The mech pilot directed his steely eyes at Ves. No words escaped from his mouth.

Ves wanted to palm his face. He purposefully aimed to make sure that William remained averse to communication! This also happened to apply to him, so Ves wouldn't necessarily be able to gain anything from William's mouth!

"It's clear he's still Silent William." Gloriana remarked as she hugged Clixie like a baby. "What now?"

"Let's throw him to Dr. Ranya and Dr. Lupo so that they can examine his physical and mental condition. I want to make sure there is nothing wrong with his body and mind. Once we know that Silent William isn't breaking down for whatever reason, I guess we'll stick him into a similar pod next."

If Silent William became a true expert candidate, then he should be able to pilot a virtual mech with ease!

"Sounds good."

They proceeded to emerge from the lab chamber and order some subordinates to bring William Urbesh away. For now, the pair had been busy long enough and weren't in the mood to do anything more. It would take some time for the doctors to complete William's examination.

Whether Ves satisfied the demands of the Rim Guardians remained to be seen. He had a good feeling, though. As long as everyone conveniently ignored William's drastic personality changes, he truly had the grounds to revive the Urbesh Clan now that he 'advanced' to expert candidate!

To Ves, this was a job well done!

