

Chapter 1361 Itching for Battle

As their preemptive counterattack took place, Ves frequently itched his hand towards his holstered Peaceful Repose.

His eyes also frequently strayed towards the 'suitcase' that Nitaa carried in her spare hand. He was tempted to order her to hand it over to him so he could don his custom suit of combat armor. Who knew if the headquarters was about to come under attack?

Yet the days of stumbling across trouble or running into battle with his Amastendira spitting lasers were over. As a Journeyman Mech Designer, his place was in the rear, far away from the action where all of the actual combat took place.

Ves felt very strange about this. While he knew he ought to be placed in the safest position possible, a part of him wanted to get close to the action.

How could he call himself a man if he cowered so far in the rear that he couldn't even hear the sounds of mechs clashing against other mechs?

He disliked how well Mrs. Linzif's headquarters isolated sound. None of the characteristic noises of mechs on the move or launching attacks reached the building.

In fact, soon after the fighting at the underground parking zone began, the entire headquarters entered into lockdown!

Metal shutters slid over the transparent windows and entrances. The receptionists and other personnel immediately evacuated their posts while armored guards began to mobilize into action.

The security guards regarded Ves and his company with wary apprehension. They had observed some of the Battle Criers moving out and breaking into a nearby underground parking hall.

Ves was definitely responsible for the fighting that occurred not too far away! When the security captain that walked up to them asked them to leave, Ves plainly refused.

"We will be staying here for the moment. It's not safe outside. If the situation deteriorates, I hope you will make your underground evacuation exits available to us."

The imperious tone of voice left no room for arguing. The security captain had no choice but to return empty-handed. He was deeply reluctant to antagonize a Journeyman!

"As long as Mrs. Linzif doesn't say anything, we can stay." Ves said.

"Why hasn't she told us that?"

"Because she doesn't want to get involved in this mess."

As events continued to unfold outside, Ves, Gavin, Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar continued to wait for further development.

During the wait, Ves became increasingly impatient. He hopped from foot to foot and continually caressed his holstered gun. It felt too unnatural for him to be so far from the fighting! Even though he knew he wouldn't be of any use in this situation, he still felt antsy about his lack of agency!

Both Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar recognized his abnormal behavior.

"So the stories I've read about you on the galactic net are true." The Kinner mercenary leader remarked. "You really did live through a couple of battles."

Ves sardonically smiled to himself. "Yeah. I did live through some battles, but I never asked to be there. I know better than to run head-first into danger. It's just that in the past I've come under attack a lot. Being on the other end is a surreal situation for me. It's rare for me to be in the position to preempt an attack on me by attacking first."

"This is what I am here for. What we are here for." Nita answered from her helmet. "I don't know what your previous circumstances were like, but you've made a good choice bringing us aboard. It is our job to address your security concerns so you don't have to pull out your gun and fend off the attackers by yourself."

Her words reflected the changes that Ves had been through lately. No longer did the galaxy regard him as an inconsequential Apprentice Mech Designer.

Now, he not only became a Journeyman, but also a galactic citizen! While the utility of the latter was a little dubious, it nonetheless signified that he had become a person of means!

Rather than equate himself as a gun-toting mech designer, he should instead regard himself as a true leader. Someone who sent others to battle in his stead because it was completely unnecessary for him to move into action in person.

The logic of it was very clear. Most of his fellow mech designers had no problem recognizing this simple truth.

But not Ves. He was different. The irrational part of his mind still found it disturbing that he opted to cower in the lobby of Linzif's headquarters than to go out and give the assassins a piece of his mind!

For now, he managed to control his urges. He wouldn't be able to do anything meaningful anyway.

A few minutes passed by as Ves continued to press down his nerves. At some point, Commander Cinnabar received a hopeful message.

"The hostile mechs have all been taken down." He grinned. "Two of our mechs suffered severe damage, but that's the extent of the damage."

"Let me see the extent of the damage." Ves demanded.

The mercenary commander's comm displayed a simple readout of the damage.

"All of the damage is from laser weapon fire." Ves noted. "The hostile mechs are completely geared towards launching a surprise attack on a vulnerable vehicle. They're not equipped to fight against mechs with at least decent armor."

Ranged mechs armed with laser weapons packed a lot less punch than mechs armed with physical weapons. They could unleash a lot of damage over the course of a battle, but they fared poorly when beset in their hideouts by a bunch of melee mechs!

Despite outnumbering the Battle Crier melee mechs by two-to-one, the hostile mechs had truly been unable to put up a good fight when cornered!

"Seems like our bet to launch a preemptive attack worked out. It would have been a nightmare to fight those mechs in the open." Cinnabar grunted in satisfaction. "The only issue now is that our actions have alarmed the Planetary Guard. We're to cease and desist all ongoing action."

"It's fine. Tell Commander Meivin if he can help us smooth over our differences with the authorities. If that's not enough, I'll go talk to Mrs. Linzif and see if we can't work something out. The opposing mechs did fire first, right?"

"Haha! Of course! It was easy as pie to provoke them into firing at us!"

"How did your boys manage to do it? Tell me honestly."

"My mechs merely closed the distance while broadcasting insults and threats. Once the enemy mech pilots heard how we plan to torture them, they quickly lost their nerve and fired!"

"Ah. Well, I would fire too if I were in their position."

The Battle Criers evidently bluffed and won. Even though both sides knew that the side who launched the first attack would incur a justifiable response, the enemy mech pilots still attacked first.

They had no choice! Letting the Battle Criers walk up to their ranged mechs meant giving up their crucial distance advantage!

If the Battle Criers disregarded the rules and swung their swords, then no amount of trust in the rules would protect them from those who acted like they broke them for a living! The obvious hoodlum nature of the Battle Criers played a key role this time!

At some point in time, the Planetary Guard arrived to impose order. Though the fighting had already ended, the authorities still treated the Battle Criers mechs as potential hostiles.

A huge back-and-forth ensued over what exactly happened and what gave Ves the right to order his escort mechs to launch a seemingly unprovoked attack.

Ves declined to say anything about the observers, the coordinating figure who directed the operation or his own suspicions towards the shady group of mechs holed up nearby.

He simply answered most of their questions with a simple statement.

"They fired first."

Naturally, the Planetary Guard did not treat this answer seriously. According to the footage they obtained, while the unknown mechs did look suspicious, the Battle Crier mechs that barged into their hiding spot did everything possible to provoke a hostile reaction!

For this reason, the excuses that Ves had offered stood on shaky grounds. He already knew he wouldn't be able to talk himself out of this situation alone. He was counting on someone to bail him out.

To his surprise, after an hour of maneuvering behind scenes, Commander Meivin of the Dustravens finally managed to get the Planetary Guard off their backs.

The Redweller mercenary commander had long exited his own mech in order to report to Ves in person.

"The authorities are reluctant to let the matter go, but my contacts managed to persuade them their time is better spent elsewhere."

"What's the price?" Ves asked.

He was not naive to think the Planetary Guard retreated without a fuss.

"They've 'appropriated' all of the wrecks. The Battle Criers won't be able to claim salvage on any of the trashed machines. Supposedly it is for compensation for all of the damages we've caused."

Ves snorted. "They can have the salvage."

Sure, a single half-abandoned parking zone got trashed, but so what? The Planetary Guard had plainly demanded a bribe!

Fortunately, Ves was more than happy to relinquish the salvage. Right now, getting the authorities off his back was much more important. Finding out the motives and the identities of the attackers was another priority.

"All of the hostile mech pilots committed suicide before we could capture them." Commander Cinnabar replied with a scowl. "We won't get any answers from them. Tch."

"We'll have to see what Lucky managed to do."

Once they got rid of their entanglement with the authorities, they openly began to move towards the hidden command center of the attackers. None of them had any illusion that the Planetary Guard stopped paying attention to the foreigners.

The high-profile mechs accompanying their shuttle already made it impossible for them to obscure their movements.

For these reasons, Ves did not even bother to hide his movements.

Some time later, he and his group entered a medium-sized abandoned office building. They moved all the way up to the top floor where they entered an office room that used to belong to an executive.

"That's a lot of equipment." Ves commented calmly as he took in the projectors, the terminals and the other gear. "They held the entire city district under observation!"

Most of the gear had been wrecked. Numerous claw marks rent their way straight through most of the processing banks. The few projectors that remained functional displayed various angles of the streets around Linzif's headquarters.

As Ves focused on the hardware, Gavin quickly ran out of the door and barfed out the contents of his stomach in the corridor. The stench of blood and the sight of half-a-dozen corpses sickened him to no end!

Different from Gavin, Fe Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar looked impressed.

"Your cat is more effective than any infiltrator!" Nitaa praised. "None of these operatives managed to pull out their guns before their throats got clawed out!"

"My cat is very talented." Ves grinned. "Did you think I'm only bringing him around because I need something to pet all day? To be honest, you aren't the first bodyguard in my service. Lucky has been fulfilling this role all this time."

Ves and the Kinners directed their attention to the star of the show. The cat proudly sat on top of the chest of an unconscious man.

"Meow."

"You did a good job, Lucky."

"Meow!"

As Ves showered his vain cat with praises, Commander Cinnabar approached the unconscious figure and searched his pockets.

The search yielded various weapons, gadgets and other knick knacks. The thin and seemingly ordinary man carried a whole host of equipment!

"This is the loadout of a spy." Ves observed.

"I agree." Nitaa concurred as she remained on high alert. "The operation here suggests that everyone here are professionals of sorts."

"Of sorts?"

"I've seen better, sir. These operatives don't appear to be too well-trained and their equipment is only average. It's unlikely these operatives belong to an intelligence agency."

Hearing her judgement made Ves sigh in relief. While she may be wrong, Ves had a hunch that her description was accurate.

"That still leaves a lot of options, though."

Ves suspected that either the Bloodwellers or the Whitewellers organized this attempt. Only either of them possessed compelling reasons to kill him in Redwell Province!

Chapter 1362 The Hometown Prodigy

Joshua sat behind his desk at his dorm at an advanced academy in Bentheim. When he started to excel in his classes back on Cloudy Curtain, he received an invitation to transfer to a better institution on Bentheim.

Now, despite being several years away from graduating into a full mech pilot, his inbox already started receiving invitations to join a mech regiment!

As long as he maintained the same level of results, the mech regiments promised to fast-track his entry into their ranks!

Famed Bentheim mech regiments such as the 3rd Infernal Hellhounds, the 5th Storm Enders, the 9th Colocis Grand Rollers and even the glory-studded 1st Volari Starhawks expressed their interest in him after he graduated!

To be honest, when he received an invitation from the Volari Starhawks, he almost accepted on the spot.

This was the mech regiment which birthed their latest star, Venerable Ghanso Larkinson!

Yet... did he really wish to join Venerable Ghanso's footsteps?

"My heart says otherwise." Joshua shook his head in regret.

Many of his former cadets believed that he wanted to pursue a career in the military. Just like them. Who didn't want to join the Mech Corps if they had the skills?

The better mech academies on Bentheim all had ties to various mech divisions and mech regiments. As long as a cadet stood out in the areas that mech regiments appreciated, they stood a good chance at receiving an invitation!

When Joshua first transferred to the hustling and bustling Bentheim, he met many new mech cadets. Their skills astounded him at first. All of the top

students in his academy worked extremely hard to appeal to the mech regiments they idolized!

Different from his new friends and rivals, Joshua never took more than a brief glance at the Mech Corps. Though he admired the glory it earned and the camaraderie of its mech pilots, he never pictured himself in one of their uniforms.

"I'm destined for a different career altogether!" His eyes burned with fiery passion.

The invitations from the mech regiments did not come without cause. Not only did he manage to get admitted to the renowned Meirling Mech Academy on Bentheim, he also climbed his way up until he came close to the top of the ranking of his class!

He even surpassed most of the Larkinsons attending Meirling, which made him feel very mixed. He only fell short against the freakishly prodigal mech cadets with superior genetic aptitudes!

Though his results stopped short of reaching the very top, he differed from every other top cadet because of his versatility.

He gained proficiency in both landbound and spaceborn combat! He was equally as good with wielding swords as he was in shooting down distant targets with a laser rifle!

To be honest, his mech instructors and his mech cadets first looked at him as a fool. Why would he hold off on specializing for such a long time? Wouldn't he develop in a jack-of-all-trades and a master-of-none?

In a mech culture which highly prized efficiency and specialization, what Joshua did went against common sense!

Even now, his mech instructors still lament that he might have been able to reach the top of the ranking if he stopped splitting his training in multiple specialties. If he spent all of his training time in only a single mech type, then he might have vaunted himself into the ranks of the prodigies!

"They don't understand." He muttered. "They say I haven't specialized in any mechs yet. They say I'm still being indecisive."

The words of his detractors couldn't be more wrong.

In truth, he already specialized himself long ago. He did so as he piloted his first virtual mech from an obscure mech designer account called Chasing Clouds.

He specialized in piloting every mech released by the LMC!

The Young Blood and Old Soul both sustained him during the early days of his arrival at Bentheim. He trained and grinded up the leagues of Iron Spirit outside his classes until he finally gained access to 5-star mechs.

Once he finally reached this point, he finally began to play with the two mainstays of the LMC, the enduring Blackbeak and the agile Crystal Lord!

Though piloting the virtual versions of fully-featured modern mechs strained his capacity at first, he quickly began to adjust to the load he needed to endure in order to make full use of their capabilities.

His results in the academy quickly shot up as he became more proficient in piloting the two classics of the LMC!

Everyone thought he was on track to become a premier landbound mech pilot, but since a year ago he suddenly took classes in spaceborn mech combat!

At this stage in their upbringing, most mech pilots ought to narrow down their skillset so they could spend more time on polishing their key abilities.

Not Joshua. Ever since the LMC released the Aurora Titan, he instantly bought a virtual copy and eagerly entered Iron Spirit's mech arenas in order to channel its might.

"I failed miserably!"

His butt got whooped. How could someone unused to spaceborn combat expect to fare well in space, which required specialized training before any mech pilot could fight proficiently in this gravity-forsaken environment?

Compounding the problem was that the Aurora Titan was one of the most complicated and demanding space knights ever released in the Bright Republic in recent times!

Its complex polarizing module required focused, skillful use in order to enhance the Aurora Titan's defenses. Joshua tried and failed to split his attention to all of its systems during heated moments, causing his virtual mech to be blasted out of space time and time again!

Most mech pilots would have given up. Joshua certainly felt tempted since he never committed to spaceborn mech combat before.

He refused. He was better than this. Piloting the Aurora Titan may have been ten times harder than piloting the Blackbeak, but the rush he experienced was also ten times more impactful!

His mind and emotions always rose to an unseen height whenever he piloted the virtual copy. From all of the reviews and testimonies of the physical copies of the Aurora Titan, Joshua knew that he was only experiencing a pale shadow of what the real mechs could bestow to their pilots.

"Virtual mechs are just toys!" He exclaimed to himself. "I have to pilot the real thing!"

His dream had always been to pilot the LMC's mechs. He hungered to touch the surface of their armor with his hands. He longed to sit in their extraordinary comfortable piloting chairs. As for interfacing with these great machines...

"I can't wait to experience the nirvana that many lucky mech pilots already got to enjoy!"

Ever since he chose to master the virtual Aurora Titan, he poured most of his training efforts into raising his proficiency in the relevant skills. He took additional classes and reduced his time spent on polishing his skills related to landbound mech combat.

Though it had taken more than a year of constant struggle, the Aurora Titan became easier and easier for him to control. At some point, he started winning his virtual matches, causing him to accelerate his improvement as he felt more and more in tune with his virtual mech!

As of now, the Aurora Titan almost danced according to thoughts! Though its powerful polarizing module still hindered him a bit with the endless amount of choices it offered, that didn't count for other space knights!

"All the training mechs from the academy are nothing compared to a beast like the Aurora Titan!" He snorted.

He disliked piloting mechs designed by other mech designers. Meirling's training mechs were all great machines, but they lacked the feel of any of the LMC's mechs. Even the primitive Fantasia 2R Seraphim evoked more fighting spirit from him than the cold and clinical mechs.

This was another reason why his results failed to propel him higher in the ranking.

Joshua knew that piloting non-LMC mechs was a necessary evil for now. As soon as he graduated from Meirling, he already knew where he wanted to apply.

As for the Mech Corps?

"Forget about it! Aside from one exception, there's not a single LMC mech in any of their mech rosters!"

While various mercenary corps and security companies started fielding Blackbeaks, Crystal Lords and even the rare Aurora Titan or two, Joshua quickly dismissed them from his consideration.

"Why should I join these middling outfits when I can go straight to the source?"

Only in Cloudy Curtain would he be able to pursue his dream! That was because his goal for the last couple of years had been to join the Avatars of Myth!

As the personal mech troop of Ves Larkinson himself, the outfit got to enjoy the best and latest toys of the LMC! The Avatars distinguished themselves from every other outfit that made use of LMC products by fielding the most gold label mechs!

"Gold label! I have to pilot one!"

The LMC's gold label mechs achieved a mythical reputation in a certain portion the mech community. Those who became fans of the LMC all worshipped the handmade mechs as gods in machine form!

Merely standing in front of them compelled mech pilots to bend to their knees! They were just that powerful!

Joshua knew this very well, because during one of his holidays a few months ago, he specifically visited an exhibition showing off one of the rare and vaunted gold label Aurora Titans!

The memory still sent him into a rapturous glee. His mouth widened into a blissful grin as he remembered how close he came to the impressive mech.

He never came back the same after that! His proficiency in piloting the Aurora Titan skyrocketed as he somehow clicked with the mech.

He understood its essence!

"Coming in touch with the real thing is far better than spending thousands of hours practicing with the virtual versions!"

Sadly, he hadn't been able to get a glimpse of the gold label Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords as of yet. Too few of them existed and it was far too difficult for him to find the time to attend one of their exhibitions.

The only way to solve this deprivation in his life was to join the Avatars of Myth! His hellish commitment to his training had all been for a single purpose, and that was to make the Avatars take note of him and accept him into their ranks!

With his current ranking, Joshua already felt assured he'd be able to gain a coveted spot in the Avatars. They'd been pretty prolific in recruiting for the past few years so even if he achieved a middling result, he would still have a chance of becoming an Avatar.

"It's not enough!"

Why should he be resigned to a rank-and-file position when he could instead receive vastly more attention? Not every Avatar was lucky enough to pilot an LMC mech or a gold label mech.

"I can't let the latter slip from my grasp!"

As long as he became a mech officer or a mech champion, then he would surely receive the privilege of piloting one of their precious gold label mechs!

Everything he did, he did for the Avatars!

Just thinking about wearing their uniform, fighting alongside the Larkinsons and above all piloting their growing variety of LMC mechs excited him to no end!

"I only have a few more years to go. I have to endure. I have to achieve better results. Even if the Avatars have stopped recruiting, I'll force them to take me in! They'll never refuse a top Meirling graduate!"

His greatest hope was to catch the attention of Ves Larkinson himself! His greatest ambition was to convince this great mech designer to design a mech just for him! His life was not complete until he piloted a mech uniquely responsive only to himself!

"Just you wait, Avatars! I'll be joining your ranks soon enough!"

The mech cadet turned his attention back to his terminal.

He swiped his arm, causing him to select the invitation messages that enticed him to enlist in the Mech Corps.

After a single moment of thought, he decisively swept his arm in a discarding motion, causing his account to throw all of the invitation messages into the trash bin!

"Dream on! You're only worth my time if you start fielding LMC mechs! Otherwise, you can forget about luring me into your mech regiments!"

Chapter 1363 The Zealous Chosen

The Ylvaine Protectorate had never been the same after the brief visitation of the Bright Martyr.

His coming and going only lasted a few months, but the ripple effects of his actions still echoed throughout the highly religious state to this day!

A number of highly controversial debates ensued after the Bright Martyr painfully exposed many problems the Ylvainans tried their best to bury under the ground. The division between Ylvainans had never become more stark.

Yet even as the faithful joined sides and argued against each other over the best course forward, the Protectorate had never been more united!

Despite their differences of opinion, Ylvainans of all stripes grew more ardent about the faith they held in common.

They were all Ylvainans! No matter how much they disagreed, they were still brothers and sisters! United by a set of common beliefs, it became more important than ever to present a common front against the outside galaxy!

The Curin Dynasty, which aggressively pushed for greater reforms, readily agreed to compromises whenever the Poxco Dynasty pushed back.

The stoic and stiff-necked Kronon Dynasty also shifted some of their long-held customs. They loosened up some of their rules and cautiously introduced some compassion in their decision-making.

The Shepherds of the Flock, the Attendants of Ylvaine and the Protectors of the Faith all experienced their own renaissance. No longer did they grow further apart and divide the Protectorate into three isolated silos.

For the first time in hundreds of years, the three leading dynasties each started to move closer to each other!

Even the notorious True Ylvaine Dynasty subsided in their radical actions!

To Taon Melin, he experienced this new spirit of cooperation first-hand. As a young elite Kronon mech pilot, he originally fell under the employ of Director Cecily Curin. She selected him and five of his fellow elite Kronons to pilot the

upcoming hero mechs designed specifically to serve as her ceremonial bodyguard detail.

"How things change. It seemed only yesterday that I was treated as an outcast for my Ascensionist beliefs." He sighed.

The Ascensionists, often regarded as cultists and deviants of the orthodox Ylvainan faith, now gained prominence within the Kronon Dynasty, to the consternation of the more conservative Poxco Dynasty.

Though widespread acceptance still wasn't on the cards, Taon Melin and his fellow Ascensionist enjoyed being able to talk about their beliefs openly.

It was all thanks to the Transcendent Messengers they piloted!

The mechs that had originally been designed to serve as ceremonial bodyguards turned out to be so much more. Each of the Transcendent Messengers were masterpieces of Ylvainan mech design!

Their ability to touch the faith of every devout Ylvainan became so famed that it became untenable for Director Cecily to maintain her possession of the mechs!

They were simply too precious to remain in the possession of a single person! The Protectorate already declared the mechs as national treasures. From what Taon had heard, the Poxco Dynasty even contemplated designating them as holy relics of the Ylvainan Faith!

The only reason why the traditionalists hadn't done so yet was due to their reluctance to further add to the credibility to the Bright Martyr. The Poxcos still regarded the notorious Brighter as a harbinger of change, both for the better and for the worse.

As Taon quietly contemplated the drastic turns of his life, the person sitting next to him at a bench in the courtyard of the Inquisition Headquarters finally spoke up. His guest had arrived a moment ago.

"How are you adjusting after your transfer?" Director Cecily asked with mild concern. "Neither of us foresaw that you'd be transferred to the Ylvainan Inquisition. Unfortunately, the Poxcos are insistent on obtaining control over Zeal."

"I am content, director." Taon offered the powerful woman a respectful nod. "I am the chosen of Zeal. The Inquisition tried their best to replace me with their Poxco mech pilots, but none of them can bring out its strength as well as I've been able to demonstrate."

Older mech pilots. Younger mech pilots. Innocent mech pilots. Scheming mech pilots. The Poxco Dynasty paraded many different variations of Poxco pilots in an attempt to supplant Taon Melin from the valuable relic mech.

Each of them failed!

Few mech pilots could proficiently pilot a hero mech to begin with. Those that did encountered another problem, which was that Zeal felt a little pale when others piloted the mech. Only when Taon Melin himself entered the cockpit did the mech truly come alive, as the Living Mech Corporation often described.

He was chosen!

Not only him, but his fellow Kronons who were originally assigned to serve as Director Cecily's bodyguard had been chosen as well!

It was as if the Bright Martyr specifically designed each of the six Transcendent Messengers for their use!

Not even the handful of Poxco expert pilots that the Inquisition paraded to Zeal succeeded in bringing out its greatest strength!

Both Taon, Director Cecily and the rest of the Ylvaine Protectorate heard about this strange phenomenon. The Ylvainans started to believe the mechs had minds of their own!

That Taon and his fellow chosen all happened to be Ascensionists led to a lot of bitterness from the Attendants of Ylvaine. Had they been wrong in rejecting the Ascensionist beliefs?

One thing was for sure. Taon did not mix well with the Ylvainan Inquisition. Despite his zeal and devotion in the Ylvainan Faith, the Inquisition was still sour at their failure to replace him with one of their Poxco mech pilots!

Director Cecily gave the young mech pilot a reassuring smile. "Your place as Zeal's designated mech pilot will remain assured so long as you align with its ideals. The Bright Martyr designs each of his mech with the premise that they are alive. Never take Zeal for granted."

"I am learning something new every time I hop inside its cockpit. Zeal is a fantastic mech and one that has brought me closer to the prophet than any church or shrine has ever managed to do. I am endlessly grateful that I received the opportunity of doing the prophet's work each time I sortie with Zeal!"

"I'm glad you think that way, Taon, because the time for you to muster up your mechs in parades and publicity stunts will soon be over. The Star Faith Collective have become more and more unbridled in their aggressive incursions. One of the reasons why I'm visiting the headquarters of the Inquisition is because we are discussing the potential deployment of several Transcendent Messengers to the border systems. Zeal may be one of the mechs that we will select to defend one of the border planets."

"I am already aware of my mission." Taon's eyes lit up with fiery conviction. "The Starrers must be stopped, and they shall! This, I am certain! Zeal is destined to turn back their unbridled assaults!"

"I.. see." Director Cecily replied. "Please keep in mind that failure is not an option. The Ylvaine Protectorate is taking a huge risk by deploying some of the Transcendent Messengers into battle. Zeal and every other mech in the set have evolved into symbols of our people. Their defeat in battle will come as a gut punch to the Protectorate. The loss or capture of a Transcendent Messenger will deal incalculable damage to our faith!"

"Zeal will not lose! I will die before I let that happen!"

"You are not piloting Sacrifice. Please do not treat your mech too carelessly, Taon. The deployment of the Transcendent Messengers represent a huge gamble on our part. While a considerable number of leaders are opposed to risking them in battle, I think the Ylvaine Protectorate needs to see that these mechs are not just there to look pretty. They are hero mechs, after all. To truly galvanize our people, the Transcendent Messengers must lead the charge!"

None of these political concerns registered to Taon that much. To him, piloting Zeal to the best of his ability was all that mattered. He already knew that Zeal was destined to be more than just a glorified parade mech.

"You will not find me wanting in battle." He promised. "Every Kronon mech pilot is already prepared for battle!"

"This isn't only about yourself! Do not forget who and what you are fighting for! Aside from the Ylvainan Faith and its believers, you are also fighting for one more person. The Bright Martyr himself is counting on you. Many Ylvainans are already convinced of his blessed status, but the more traditional-minded Ylvainans are still on the fence."

"They are fools." Taon crossed his arms. "They will see the truth. I am sure of it. Every mech pilot that isn't piloting one of the Bright Martyr's mechs are missing out on a golden opportunity to ascend and grow closer to Prophet Ylvaine!"

Director Cecily smiled. "I'm glad you think that way. Please voice your opinions more, even if unasked. The Bright Martyr needs all the help he can get to gain wider acceptance. Above all else, please develop yourself further and aim your sights higher. If you happen to excel in a magnificent manner, there might be an opportunity waiting for you in the future."

"I'm aware. You don't need to look any further. Zeal and I will be at your disposal whenever we are needed. The visions do not lie!"

"Your conviction is admirable. If only more Ylvainans were supportive of our cause."

After a few minutes of chatting, Director Cecily finally departed from one of the inner courtyards of the Inquisition headquarters. She was a busy woman, and she still had a few more chosen mech pilot to visit.

Taon watched the woman saunter away in the company of her bodyguards.

Recent events may have brought many Ylvainans together, but they also hardened certain radicals against the woman responsible for pushing them in motion.

Director Cecily endured three different assassination attempts. Each of them failed, but her protection detail grew more and more numerous.

"She doesn't even need all of that protection." Taon contemptuously snorted. "She is far more deadly than all of the assassins put together!"

Taon saw visions. He had been seeing them for a while. Sometimes, the vivid visions came to him when he piloted Zeal. Sometimes, they came to him during his sleep.

A normal person would have dismissed these visions as dreams or fabrications of the mind. Perhaps even some Ylvainans would doubt the veracity of their visions despite their vividness.

Not Taon. He plainly accepted the visions as the truth. While he was not conceited enough to claim that he was following in the footsteps of the Great Prophet, he nonetheless believed he was blessed by the great figure.

"I am chosen."

This singular belief sustained him throughout all of the changes in his life. No matter who he worked for, no matter how much the Inquisition wanted to replace him with their own, his visions gave him the bedrock he needed to stand firm.

"I am ready."

He was ready to fight! He did not convert to Ascensionism because he wanted to live a life of comfort and luxury.

Though he had the option to sit back and enjoy the glory of being one of the chosen, he knew he could be so much more.

"I am a vessel."

He could feel it in his bones. Just as Ves Larkinson channeled Prophet Ylvaine, Taon too believed he too represented his will!

"The Bright Martyr..."

Taon held a lot of thoughts about the man. Unlike many Ylvainans, he easily got around to the idea that the Great Prophet favored a seemingly-faithless Brighter mech designer.

"Everyone is an Ylvainan!"

The prophet cared for every human and alien. Even those who held contradictory beliefs to the Ylvainan Faith still deserved redemption.

"Even the Star Faith Collective is worthy of redemption." He muttered.

Of course, they still needed to be taught a lesson before they saw the light. The Starrers and their heretical worship of stars needed to be stopped!

Chapter 1364 The Lifelong Partner

Jannzi Larkinson still couldn't believe how a single sortie changed her entire life.

The moment when she piloted the first production copy during the product reveal of the Aurora Titan, she never came back the same.

Jannzi pressed her hand against the Shield of Samar. A few years ago, she never dreamt she'd be able to become a notable mech pilot of the vaunted 7th Apocalypse Heralds.

Not only did the Heralds welcome her with open arms, they also invested lots of time and resources into nurturing her growth!

Ever since she became a Herald, the higher-ups showered her with genetic treatments, specialized training courses and exclusive tutoring from fellow expert pilots.

The brass thought that all of the focused nurturing succeeded in accelerating her growth.

While her skills and battle instincts indeed improved at a rapid pace, Jannzi knew the real reason for her progress came from a very different source.

She looked up at the immense bulk of the Shield of Samar with its savage lizard head at the very top.

"You've been my companion for all this time. Accompanying me to the Apocalypse Heralds has been a life saver for me, Shield."

She often spoke to her mech. As someone who spent some time with Ves Larkinson and his company, she knew their values inside-out. The LMC's motto spoke to her in a way that no other advice ever could.

Living Mechs. Partners for Life.

Her relationship with the Shield of Samar embodied those words. Whenever the Apocalypse Heralds compelled her to pilot another mech with the hopes that she would move away from the sluggish super-medium space knight, she never felt the same connection.

They weren't her partners. Her performance noticeably dropped and her drive to excel became noticeably absent.

After a lot of arguing and pushback, she finally convinced them to let her continue using the Shield of Samar as her main mech.

She knew the Heralds still weren't quite convinced of the Aurora Titan model. While it functioned well as a source of courage and inspiration, its lackluster mobility still posed a lot of tactical constraints.

The regimental commander probably hoped that Jannzi would grow out of her mech. Once she advanced to expert, it would be far too much to ask for a young and inexperienced Journeyman like Ves to design an expert mech.

Was the Shield of Samar destined to become obsolete?

"No. Partners don't abandon each other. Especially when we are bound for life." She whispered softly as she continued to caress the surface of her personal mech.

An unspoken accord developed between her and the brass. As long as Jannzi kept making brisk progress, the Heralds would let her keep using the Shield of Samar.

The moment she started to stall, her superiors would renew their push to replace her mech.

What they didn't realize was that Jannzi only worked harder in order to stave off this threat. Her love and devotion for the Shield of Samar was so much greater than a temporary fancy. She considered her mech to be the first and only partner of her life!

After some time alone with the Shield of Samar, someone else entered the mech stable, breaking her quiet contemplation.

"Jannzi. You are looking good."

"Venerable Larkinson."

The still young-looking Ghanso let out a rueful smile. "Cut it out. We're alone here and this isn't an official visit. The Starhawks just happened to stop by this space station, that's all. Since I happen to be here, I might as well visit the latest relative that has joined our ranks."

"I'm not an expert pilot."

"Not yet, but it's only a matter of time." Ghanso grinned. "I've read the reports. Your progress is remarkably fast. Though you have a lot of catching up to do with regards to your skills, your previous display of forced resonance hasn't lied. Anyone who can do that much upon their elevation to expert candidate will assuredly become an expert pilot in due time."

Jannzi knew in her heart that her older cousin stated a fact, but she did not allow his encouragement to blind her into complacency. If she thought she

could sail her way into becoming an expert pilot in her sleep, she might instead begin to regress!

Expert candidates who demonstrated forced resonance had failed before. Jannzi studied their cases carefully and all of them taught her that expert pilots were exceptional for a reason.

When an expert candidate ceased to be exceptional and merely performed as a normal mech pilot, then they failed their candidacy! With such a low commitment to improving their ability to fight, they had no right to enter the ranks of experts!

Jannzi knew in her heart that the Shield of Samar demanded a worthy partner. Ever since she first interfaced with her mech, she resolved to do her best to meet her partner's expectations!

"Whether I'm an expert candidate or expert pilot, I will always be the same." She declared. "I am Jannzi Larkinson, and I am the only partner of the Shield of Samar."

Her forceful words made quite an impact on Ghanso, but not in a good way. The man crossed his arms. "Ah, that. I've heard about your undue attachment to your personal mech. Jannzi.. the mech our cousin designed may be great in some ways, but it falls short in many other areas. It's a commercial mech designed aimed at private sector mech pilots. While it's a bit more powerful and expensive than other machines, it's still a mech designed to make a profit."

"I've heard those words many times, Ghanso. Don't bother trying to convince me to pilot another mech. Moving on to another mech is like abandoning my spouse for a better-looking man. It's unthinkable!"

Ghanso sighed. He tried. "Alright. I said my piece. As an expert, I know our kind can get very stubborn in some ways. Sometimes, that can get us killed."

"I will have died a worthy death if I go down with my partner."

"Let's not go any further into this topic." Ghanso quickly said in an alarmed tone of voice. "One of the reasons I wanted to meet with you was to ask you about something important. What do you think about Ves Larkinson?"

"Hm? He's a fantastic mech designer. I cannot fathom how he conceived of the Aurora Titan design and built the Shield of Samar, but I am forever grateful to him. Like every other Larkinson, I've been skeptical about the first and only mech designer of our family, but he is a great man."

"I see."

"You disagree?"

Ghanso grimaced. "He's a Larkinson. And not. To be honest, I don't know what to think of Ves. He is so wealthy he can outspend us a hundred times over, but the only money the rest of the family receives are the dividends issued by his company. From what I heard about him from the other Larkinsons, he's not enthusiastic about bringing in more Larkinsons to help him run his business or his private mech troop."

"He earned his success through his own efforts."

"He's a Larkinson! He ought to be more grateful to the family! Even if he didn't have what it took to become a mech pilot, he still spent a lot of time among numerous veteran mech pilots, each of whom imparted valuable stories and lessons to him. The mechs he designed are partially made possible due to the heritage he has enjoyed as a Larkinson. Sometimes I wonder if he truly shares our blood. He's a mech designer, an oddball!"

"Your arguments are contradictory, Ghanso. First, you complain about how he's been ungrateful despite being raised as a Larkinson. Next you question how little he has in common with a Larkinson."

"Ugh! Sorry. Debating is not my strong suit. I'm sure the so-called 'Devil Tongue' can beat me flat with his words!"

Jannzi turned her full attention to her famous cousin. "Are you trying to grow a wedge between Ves and I? What is your problem with him? Despite what you think, he is still a Larkinson!"

"Just because he shares our family name doesn't mean he shares our values. Wake up. See what has happened with the Larkinsons. For centuries, we cultivated an image of an honorable, neutral and upstanding family. Whenever someone hears of us, they associate us with our long-standing tradition of military service."

"We are still that family."

"Not if we let Ves poison our family further!" Ghanso retorted. "Don't you see how we have changed in the last five years? Old ideals such as dedicating as many Larkinsons as possible to public service has made way for the pursuit of wealth and power! No longer did we maintain our neutral stance. Now, we have apparently joined Ves in throwing in our lot with the Tovar Family! All the while, some of our younger cousins no longer aspire to enlist in the Mech Corps. Instead, they have set their sights on piloting mechs for the Avatars of Myth!"

Such arguments sounded very familiar to Jannzi. The discussion within the Larkinson Family continued to turn more and more towards their recent changes in direction. Many military purists such as Ghanso wanted to retain their old and dust-laden customs.

"Families change. People change." She replied. "The Larkinsons of yesterday are not the Larkinsons of today. The Larkinsons of the future will doubtfully be different as well. Change is not inherently something to be feared."

A scowl appeared on Ghanso's face. "You and the rest of you money-loving Larkinsons can go ahead and abandon everything our family stands for. As long as you Ves worshippers continue down this corrupt road, the true Larkinsons will not be a part of this travesty any further."

His words caused Jannzi to sense that something great was at play.

"You are talking about a schism."

"I prefer to see it as a divorce. You see, Jannzi, the Larkinson Family has grown too big and too scattered. Our values are being eroded by the toxic dividends the LMC constantly dumps into the coffers of the Larkinson Estate. A number of concerned Larkinson elders have expressed an increasing amount of concern about this unwelcome development. For now, we are trying to do everything we can to keep the Larkinsons together, but our patience will run out at some point. In a future steering committee, we plan to issue our ultimatum."

"Your ultimatum has no chance in passing." She smirked. "The amount of Larkinsons who are mech pilots are in the minority, and many of our cousins in the Mech Corps have made good use of their expanded budgets. In my eyes, the Larkinsons have never been better. All the money at our disposal has let us participate in expensive training programs or make use of gene therapies that used to be reserved for our wealthier rivals in the service."

"The Larkinsons have been doing fine for centuries without those luxuries! Too many Larkinsons are being spoiled by this bounty! I am starting to see too many Larkinsons climb up to positions that they didn't deserve! Instead of prizing diligence and hard work, they are starting to realize that they can achieve the same results by spending lots of money on their problems!"

"That's easy for you to say, Venerable Ghanso. Not everyone is fortunate and talented enough to break through to your height in a matter of years."

The air between them soured by the second. Ghanso did not hide his contempt at Jannzi's lackadaisical attitude towards the changes in the family. Realizing that he wouldn't be able to make any inroads on his younger cousin, he decisively turned around and walked away.

"A proposal will be put to the vote in the steering committee one day. If it is defeated, we will still part from your company. We have no intentions of sullyng ourselves with your corrupt ilk."

Jannzi frowned. "We are still family. Is this the way a Larkinson ought to act?"

"If our proposal is shot down, then we are no longer family. You can have the Larkinson name if you want. We shall start a new family which will inherit the values that you have abandoned."

Ghanso's footsteps echoed against the deck as he slowly walked away.

Chapter 1365 Useful Body

Ves, Nitaa, Commander Cinnabar and Lucky all moved out of the hidden command center with the unconscious spy commander in tow. They moved into a different floor of the abandoned office building before finding an abandoned storeroom to conduct their interrogation.

Though Gavin attempted to follow, Ves turned him away.

"You're not cut out for this, Benny. You should stay outside."

"I can do this! If Fe Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar can stomach this much, so should I!"

"Your role is different from theirs. Bringing you into the room is as inappropriate as sending a mech technician into battle. Don't think you're useless just because you can't fight. If you want to be of use to me, why not coordinate with Commander Meivin in smoothing our relations with the planetary authorities? Paisley I must be wondering what we are doing here. Try your best in keeping them at bay."

After his stern lecture, Ves succeeded in soothing Gavin. He understood his assistant's helplessness. Ves himself experienced the same resignation during the war whenever he witnessed the Flagrant Vandals deploying for battle.

Support personnel like Ves and Gavin should never be the ones getting shot and firing back at their enemies. Though his instincts roiled against the thought, Ves recognized that he was more like Gavin than someone like Nitaa or even Lucky.

Both of them were in the same boat. Ves was just in denial sometimes. Be it his Larkinson blood, his history of getting caught in the middle of the fighting or some reason, he still had to force himself to stay put and place his trust in the people he hired or bought.

He had to admit that it required far more effort than he found ideal. Some habits died harder than others.

Once he settled down his assistant, he entered the room and locked it. With Lucky on guard and maintaining a strong ECM field, no one should be aware of what was about to take place.

"Alright, please wake up our captive. It's time we get some information out of this fellow."

Both Nitaa and Cinnabar had already stripped the man down to his underwear and searched his body numerous times. Ves and Lucky also scanned the unconscious body thoroughly in order to assure that they hadn't missed any hidden implants or suicide pills or anything like that.

Nitaa patted the unconscious man's wiry chest. "The man is clean. I'm fairly confident in my judgement. Our captive may be a trained professional, but he is not an elite operative."

"For this reason, don't expect to obtain much intel out of this fellow."

Commander Cinnabar added as he chewed on some kind of stimulant.

"Expendable field agents don't know much and the annoying part is that their trainers invested the most in their resistance to interrogation and indoctrination techniques. Just think about it. Who wants to hire operatives who readily spill everything they know once they fall into enemy hands?"

"I understand what you are saying. Let's try anyway."

Once Nitaa woke the unconscious man up by injecting a small substance in his bloodstream, the fellow slowly blinked and took in his situation.

"Ah."

Realization dawned upon the man as soon as he beheld the barren and faded storage room interior as well as the three people surrounding his bound and prone body.

Nitaa grabbed the man's hair and janked it up. "What is your name."

"Foreign scum! You won't get anything out of me!" The captive glared.

"That's what they all say." She spoke while jabbing her chest with her fist, causing the man to oomph. "Now let me repeat myself. What is your name!"

The man stubbornly kept his mouth shut even after more forceful persuasion from Nitaa. Just as she was about to draw out a drug that could make people more pliable to suggestions, Ves raised his palm.

"The methods you're about to employ likely won't work." He said. "Tough customers like these are already conditioned to resist these tricks."

The captive burst into laughter. "Hahaha! That's for sure! You must be new at this! Otherwise, you wouldn't mention this in my presence! Amateurs!"

Ves directed a shark-like grin. "Oh, just because I am questioning our methods doesn't mean I've given up. I just have an alternative method to get what I want."

He finally realized what it meant to hold a captive, especially one whose life and death mattered little to him or his enemies.

His eyes lit up as he raked his gaze over his unwitting captive's entire body.

The man in question shuddered as he momentarily lost his composure. Why was the target of the failed assassination attempt staring at him like he was a precious treasure?! His lower body started to clench as he tried to guess the foreign mech designer's impure intentions!

In fact, Ves indeed looked at the man with appreciation. He belatedly saw the uses in a captive who was both hostile and expendable.

Test subject!

To Ves, the man might as well be short, muscular and stubby rather than someone who held normal human proportions!

In his free time, Ves often fantasized about the experiments he wanted to conduct in order to explore what he could do with his spiritual powers.

Ever since he departed from Aeon Corona VII, he missed the unbridled way he could just grab some dwarves from the wilderness and subject them to his whims.

Civilized space functioned as both a refuge and a cage to Ves. He liked the safety and adherence to rules, but only when they suited him. Whenever he thought up a great experiment, he always bumped into inconvenient ethical rules that prohibited him from doing what he wanted to people.

To his credit, Ves indeed abided by these rules. Well, mostly. Even he knew that it would be a bad idea to recklessly experiment with innocent people.

He could get caught!

If there was one lesson that Ves had learned from other examples, it was that acting without scruples meant he would get caught sooner or later!

So for a long time, he held himself back and tried his best to maintain the conduct of a normal, civilized mech designer.

Yet this time Ves saw an opportunity to let out the part of him that he long held back. His inquisitive, experimental nature hidden in the back of his consciousness roused itself from its dormancy and entered the forefront of his mind.

"Hahahaha. Hahahaha! HAHAHAHA!"

Even though his Kinner subordinates looked at him like a weirdo, Ves still let himself go! No longer did he feel the need to hold back! Too much time had passed since he last got his grubby hands on a test subject!

Perhaps he might have held back if he was still in the Bright Republic, but right now he was in the Chuko Republic! The faltering state was falling apart at the seams!

With an absent central government, a power-hungry provincial government and a corrupt planetary government, law and order no longer held sway in where he was at right now!

Having recently persuaded the authorities to back off in exchange for a hefty bribe, they probably wouldn't intervene no matter how much his test subject screamed!

The situation was perfect!

Eagerness rolled off his body as he energetically rubbed his hands. "Hehe. The method I have in store for you is something that I always wanted to try out. Thank you for attempting to assassinate me. I really needed someone

who I absolutely don't care about at all. Now that you happened to have land in my grasp, don't think I'll let you die without extracting every possible utility out of your body and mind!"

Genuine fear began to well up inside the captive. Faint stories about mech designers started to surface in his mind. Some were perfectly normal aside from a few quirks, but the smarter they became, the more often they deviated from the norm.

Some mech designers were straight up mad when they got excited!

"Stay back, you freak! Stay back!"

Ves grinned and ignored the pleas of his test subject. He hovered closer and gently brushed the top of his test subject's head. "What a precious mind. Hmmm. No potential. A pity. Still, let's see what I can do with your pretty little head. I hope you won't succumb too quickly."

Eagerness and enthusiasm visibly welled out of Ves as he started to concentrate his mind on the experiments he wanted to perform. His mind, body and design seed all harmonized with each other as he began to consider the results this impromptu experiment might yield him today.

The captive man squirmed and tried to bite his tongue. Nitaa had been ready for his and firmly inserted her armored fingers in his mouth, preventing him from using his teeth against himself!

With Commander Cinnabar pressing his weight against their captive's body, the unfortunate operative had no way to stop the scary mech designer!

Sweat poured over the captive's brows as Ves emanated an increasingly threatening vibe! His entire body urged him to flee!

"OMPHAE! STOOO! I GIE UUUWW! III UWWW TEEWW UUU ANNYWIN!!!"

Just as Ves started constructing a devious image in his mind, Nitaa held up her other arm. "Sir, I think our captive has a change of heart."

"What?" Ves asked. His momentum stalled. Some of his excited energy disappeared as he took in her words. "He's given up?"

"He broke." Cinnabar remarked with a grin. "Just look at this fellow. He looks so pathetic right now!"

"Please, Mr. Larkinson!" The captive cried. "Stay away from me! I will tell you anything I know! Just treat me with respect!"

"..."

His excitement suddenly deflated. What kind of ridiculous situation was this? Just as Ves wanted to experiment with a method he came up with to manipulate someone into opening their mouths, the test subject suddenly withdrew from the test!

Test subjects weren't supposed to do that!

"This fellow..." Ves gritted his teeth.

"Let's make use of this while we still can, sir!"

Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar ignored their employer's visible dismay and began to pump the unresisting spy for information.

"What is your name?"

"Mackie Cire!"

"Where do you come from?"

"Paisley I. I was born and raised on this planet."

"What do you do for a living?"

"I lead strike teams on behalf of my organization."

"What is your organization?"

"33 C. It's a meaningless name specifically designed to expose nothing about us. Personally, I've long suspected that we are just a small cell of a much larger spy network. I really don't know much else, though!"

"Is 33 C a Whiteweller or a Bloodweller organization?"

"None! I don't know! Personally, I'm more inclined towards the Whitewellers, but 33 C has conducted operations that advance either one or the other."

This caused Ves, Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar to look askance at each other. They suspected that Mackie Cire worked for a clandestine organization on the side of the Whitewellers or Bloodwellers. To hear that 33 C fit in neither of those two boxes meant that they likely wouldn't be able to identify the ones who gave the order for the hit!

Nitaa asked another question. "What is the reason for targeting Mr. Larkinson, then?"

"I don't know!" Mackie helplessly shrugged. "We rarely targeted foreigners, but it has happened now and then. To be honest, we were only ordered to put ourselves in a position to take out Mr. Larkinson's shuttle! I was still waiting to receive the order to go ahead with the assassination attempt or abort our attempt when your machine cat jumped on us all!"

Lucky proudly meowed from the side.

As Nitaa continued to pepper Mackie for intel, Ves stood silently with nothing else to do.

His eagerness and enthusiasm departed from his mind like air flowing out of a punctured balloon. He had so much in store! How could his test subject lose his nerves so quickly?!

"Goddammit What a badly-trained spy! Is this the best that Chukans can do?!"

Chapter 1366 Profound Disappointmen

In the end, Mackie Cire really didn't know all that much. Mackie and 33 C functioned as an isolated cell within a larger network of unknown alignment and origin.

Ves vaguely suspected that 33 C and its overarching network may have functioned as offshoots of a foreign intelligence agency. Unfortunately, he obtained no proof to back up this assertion.

After questioning some more about 33 C, Ves and his Kinner staff learned that the cell only received a modest amount of funding and training. The lack of generosity reflected the lack of information the members of the cell received.

A strict hierarchy existed where only the cell leader maintained contact with the larger network.

Strike team leaders such as Mackie Cire only occupied a middle position within the cell. His responsibilities solely covered networks. Other aspects such as intelligence gathering, analysis and more fell under the purview of other cell members.

"It's useless, haha!" Mackie chuckled as Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar continued to hold his bound body in place. "As soon as my superior failed to get in touch with me, he'll know the gig is up! 33 C has prepared an insane amount of contingency measures in the event that any operation has gone askew. Even if they are overreacting, they will still go through with cutting off ties and bugging out of our former base! You won't be able to track down anyone from our cell even if you squeeze out every last nugget of information from my mouth!"

"He's telling the truth." Nitaa remarked.

One of the many functions of her combat armor was the ability to identify lies. While lie-detecting systems could be fooled, it would take a highly-trained

operative like Calabast to be able to do consistently and convincingly under pressure.

Commander Cinnabar nodded, indicating that his gut feeling was inclined towards the same conclusion.

"Meow."

Even Lucky sensed nothing amiss with Mackie's statement.

As for Ves, even though he fell into a depressed mood, he still extended his spiritual senses. He failed to detect anything that hinted at dishonesty so far. Mackie had truly broken to the point where he no longer held any intentions to deceive!

"This fellow is useless." Ves scowled and gave the limp body a light kick to vent his frustration. "After all of this questioning, we don't know who is responsible, why I'm being targeted and whether there are others who want to have a second go at my life!"

He supposed he could still experiment on the man regardless if he spilled all of his beans. It wasn't as if Ves intended to let Mackie go if he obediently cooperated anyway. This was just the nature of the work he did.

Someone knocked at the door to the storage room. Ves approached it and briefly exited the room.

"Ves? The Planetary Guard is getting more and more insistent. They're constantly on the line threatening to go in regardless of my objections. Time is running out. You'll have to finish what you are doing before the authorities haul us out of this building by force!"

"Damn. Isn't our bribe enough to get them off our backs for a day?" Ves grimaced.

"We only bought off a single Planetary Guard official. Now there's a different official from another department on the line!"

"Alright. I understand. Tell the official we'll be departing in a couple of minutes."

Ves turned around and reentered the storage room. "The Planetary Guard is getting antsy. Let's cut this session short. We already obtained what we can get out of Mackie."

"So this is goodbye, right?"

It would be inconvenient for Ves if his Kinnners dragged out a captive from the building. Bribes or not, the Planetary Guard still maintained a responsibility to protect its citizens, especially from nefarious foreigners who stirred up trouble.

"Yeah. This is goodbye."

Mackie Cire closed his eyes. "I've already made my piece with this outcome. People like me are merely pieces on the board. The moment I fell into your hands is the moment I already died. Just end it quickly. Don't leave me hanging."

With a simple gesture with his hand, Nitaa immediately carried out the unspoken order. She shot the man in the head with her pistol, ruining the brains and preventing anyone else from retrieving it and pumping it for whatever information could be recovered.

The occupants of the storage room left the reddening room and joined up with Gavin. Together, they left the abandoned office building and boarded their waiting shuttle. They returned to their hotel under heavy escort.

As the shuttle brought them back to their local accommodation, Ves gathered his Kinnners in the same room to discuss their next course of action.

"While Mackie Cire talked a lot, the actual amount of useful information we've retrieved is very little." Nita began.

"That's by design." Ves gravely nodded. "Patsies like him serve as cheap and disposable tools. Once I break a wrench or something, it's far more likely that I'll throw it away and take out another one than attempt to hammer it back together."

Commander Cinnabar rubbed his red beard. "I think we did learn a few useful details. There is an unknown clandestine organization in the Chuko Republic that is specifically targeting your life for some reason. While we don't know which faction this organization belongs to, the fact that someone has taken note of you is already a cause for concern."

"It could be anyone, though. Whitewellers, Bloodwellers, Hinsoners, Phantasmers, Tradders, Hexers and whatever else you can think up are all possible suspects. We haven't been able to narrow down the culprits at all."

Ves helplessly shook his head. Today was a day marked with modest gains accompanied by a lot of frustration. He still had to process the insights he gained from his talk with the Prismatic Light. He also had to suppress his profound disappointment at being robbed of the opportunity to conduct valuable experiments related to spirituality.

He had so many ideas!

"Sir, some of the intel we've received might help us track down other members of his cell. If we move fast enough, we might be able to track them down."

"It's too late for that, Nita. 33 C may not amount to much, but they're professional enough to clean up their tracks."

"If we employ Commander Meivin's contacts to sound out the local situation, we might be able to track them down regardless. The local powers have a

much better lay of the land than us. I'm pretty sure that some of them have already kept an eye on 33 C, especially considering that the cell has been operating on Paisley I for decades."

"There's no point." Ves reiterated. "Although I'm just as pissed as you for being targeted, this isn't my first rodeo. A lot of people wanted me dead or captured at some point in time. Most of them have given up. I'm a hard man to kill and the price of killing me is only getting higher. Staying alive is a sufficient form of reprisal. It's not worth it for us to pursue the matter in a dysfunctional state where we have no allies at all who we can count on to cover our backs."

Commander Cinnabar nodded. "I think our boss is right. My Battle Criers pissed off a lot of people too, but you don't see us going on a revenge spree. There are countless bastards in the galaxy. If you ask me, I'd like to punch each and every one of them in the face, but I won't even get past their guards in most cases. Sometimes the best decision is just to let it go."

"I understand that! But this threat is bigger than that!" Nitaa burst out. "Mr. Larkinson is an eminent person! It is a grave affront for someone to target his life!"

"Look Nitaa, I get it that you're his bondswoman now, but your duty as a Kinner is to protect his life. Following up on these tangled threads will just keep our employer in the Chuko Republic longer. I don't know about you, but I think we've had more than enough of this awful state."

Only now did Ves understand why Nitaa insisted on retaliation. She took affront that someone had the audacity to target a Holy Son!

In her view, Holy Sons were the most dignified and holy humans in the galaxy. For some scumbag in the shadows to have designs on the life of a Holy Son was one of the biggest crimes imaginable!

Ves nonetheless held out his hand. "Nitaa, enough. I'm fully on Commander Cinnabar's side on this. Lashing out reflexively is not a good idea when we have the option to avoid any further problems entirely."

"What if the masterminds will try again? What if they strike you even if you've left the Chuko Republic?"

"We'll deal with that problem when it is evident that a stronger reaction is required." Ves responded. "Remember the purpose of this trip. I merely set out to sample different cultures and conduct professional exchanges with fellow mech designers. Nothing in our lists of goals state that we should stick around and get entangled in regional conflicts. None of us have a stake in the future of the Redwell Province or the Chuko Republic. If the attackers are one of the factions involved in this struggle, then all the more reason for us to get out. As soon as we leave their range, we won't face any further threats."

His arguments still offended Nitaa's sensibilities, but she was sensible enough to agree to the decision that best ensured his safety.

From what little clues they gathered from Mackie Cire, 33 C operated on Paisley I for a long time! That was a considerable investment on a very specific planet that wasn't all that important in the greater scheme.

This pointed out that the ultimate masterminds were highly likely entangled in the local power struggle!

Staying in the Chuko Republic would just expose Ves and his companions to other attacks. 33 C was just one of many cells in a vast unnamed network.

Yet no matter how vast this network stretched, Ves doubted that it extended beyond a couple of states.

The only ones who could truly do so were enemies so powerful that Ves absolutely couldn't confront directly!

"So it's decided?" Cinnabar spoke. "We're leaving?"

"Yeah. I have had enough of the Redwell Province. While we still have another destination on the agenda, we'll just scrap it. I'm more than ready to leave the Chuko Republic and it's needlessly murky struggle for power behind!"

While Ves didn't know whether he made the right choice or not, his intuition did not ring any alarm bells. That was a good enough reason for him to go through with his decision.

Everyone split up after he brooked no further argument. Although he let his Kinner subordinates voice their opinions, he was still in charge in the end.

Once Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar left, Gavin entered the room.

Both of them stared at each other for a moment.

"How do you feel, Benny?"

"I don't know. Left out? Disgusted? Scared?"

"It's okay to feel that way about today's events. No normal person should experience what we've just been through."

"Is that what you think of me?! A normal person on your staff?!"

"I think of you as more than that. You don't have to fish for compliments from me, Benny. Today has been a day where Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar happened to be of actual use. Previously, they've been sitting on their thumbs while you got to help me with managing my affairs."

"You're right." Gavin sighed. "It's silly for me to think I'm useless just because I haven't been able to do anything today."

"If you want something useful to do then please prepare for our impending exit from the Chuko Republic. Get in touch with Commander Meivin to inform him that we're cutting our regular schedule short."

"Will do, boss."

Gavin exited the room in better spirits than before.

Chapter 1367 Beating Attrition

The Barracuda escorted by the ships of the Battle Criers exited the Paisley System without any further fanfare.

The Dustravens had been left behind as Ves no longer required their services. While the local mercs assisted the visitors with getting access to planets, they did not possess any substantial spaceborn forces.

"I don't quite trust them either." Ves murmured.

He always had the feeling that the Dustravens kept the Bloodweller faction informed of everything he did. It wouldn't have bothered Ves if not for the recent assassination attempt.

Though anyone could have been responsible for putting out a hit on him, the fact that it might be a local influence meant the Bloodwellers couldn't be ruled out. No matter how much the Dustravens acted honestly, their back influence continually aroused suspicion.

Ves sat behind his desk in his stateroom as he studied the regional star chart. The fleet had been meandering through the Redwell Province for a while now. The distance to Chuko's border with the Hinson Protectorate was only a short distance away.

Once they crossed over into Hinson, Ves hoped he no longer had to watch his back against the murky factions that continued muck about in Chuko. The state was so unstable that he couldn't even count all of the factions and organizations treating it as their communal playground.

Nitaa still felt sour at letting off the people who plotted for Ves' life. His bodyguard understood the logic of making a swift exit, but her immensely high opinion of the Holy Son made her unable to stomach such a meek course of action.

As Ves thought of a way to soothe Nitaa further, someone requested entry into his stateroom.

"Come in."

The hatch automatically slid open, revealing Michael Crindon. The Kinner bondsman had been spending his time continuously aboard the Barracuda in order to tear apart the most egregious backdoors.

Even though months had passed since he started his work, Crindon was nowhere done with the momentous task! Modern starships were simply too connected and almost every point was being monitored by several sensors!

"How's your progress lately?"

Crindon shook his head. "There are limits to what we can do by hand, sir. I've finished sweeping over this stateroom and the surrounding compartments, but there are many essential sensors that are part of the core functioning of the vessel that I haven't touched. Without a thorough revamp of this ship, she will always be riddled with vulnerabilities."

"At least there are less of them than before, right?"

"Right. All of the work I've performed hasn't been in vain. Your vessel is more secure and much less susceptible to hacking or undue tampering. The ship was already hard to access, but the measures I've taken means that even those with backdoors should encounter some hindrances."

"It's not enough, right?"

"If you want to obtain a truly secure vessel, then you should commission one that lacks all of the interconnectedness and conveniences of modern starships."

"Do these ships actually exist?"

"They do, but I don't recommend you procure them. They're less responsive and much more dependent on their crews as almost every system is put under manual control. Aside from their resistance against hacking and electronic tampering, they perform much worse in almost every other aspect."

Ves looked disappointed. "Oh. I can see how that can be a problem."

Such vessels merely shifted control away from automated systems to human control. This meant that a single bad actor among the crew could do a significant amount of damage by abusing their control over critical systems!

"It'll be much better once we reach the drydock we've reserved at the Sentinel Kingdom. Due to their proximity and frequent interactions with the Nyxian Gap, they have become very good at developing resilient ships that can withstand anything the Nyxian pirates throw at them. The CFA is also very present in Sentinel."

The level of naval engineering at the Sentinel Kingdom was some of the best among third-rate states in the star sector. The Nyxian Gap consisted of so many hazardous and anomalous regions of space that regular starships generally fared very poorly in the region.

Ships had to be modified to endure the rigors of travel in a seemingly endless expanse of asteroids. It helped if the helmsmen also possessed an abundant amount of experience.

If neither of these conditions held true, then even an agile ship like the Barracuda could easily smash herself against an asteroid!

"After we arrive at the Sentinel Kingdom, I'll start taking you with me during my excursions." Ves spoke, moving on to another topic. "Although your work has been valuable up here, I need a virtual security expert by my side. Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar can't hack."

Crindon did not show a lot of confidence. "While I've shored up my hacking skills lately, I am still better at protecting systems than intruding upon them. My combat abilities aren't on par of that of Nitaa."

"I don't expect you to fight on a physical battlefield. Your place lies on the virtual battlefield. Do you understand?"

"I understand." Crindon reluctantly replied. "I can serve you better if you let me move independently."

"I'll think about it, but for now I want you to be a part of my entourage."

Ves was gathering quite the number of staff who followed him around. For a long time, he made do with Lucky and Gavin.

Now, the addition of Nitaa had already paid off by helping him foil a possible assassination attempt.

If Crindon had been on the ground with them at the time, they might have been able to recover some data from the quickly-deteriorating databanks at the time.

After a brief chat, Ves dismissed his Kinner bondsman and enjoyed some time alone. He made a grab for Lucky, only for the cat to jump and float in the air.

"Meow!"

"Oh, come on!"

Lucky denied the comfort Ves wanted as revenge for the times the cat got tossed in the air.

As his cat departed the compartment by phasing through the deck, Ves rapped his fingers against his desk. Now that his visit to the Chuko Republic came to an end, he wanted to sum up his gains.

Out of the various professional exchanges he conducted, he yielded remarkably less than he expected. A lot more mech designers turned out to be miserly, which meant that Ves wasted the majority of his visits.

Though he could have probably employed some coercion in order to get the stubborn mech designers to open up, that defeated the spirit of exchanges.

"It is not like I didn't make some gains."

Some conversations led to huge gains, which was enough to make him satisfied. The time he spent in the Chuko Republic had not gone to waste.

Even the conversations which mainly yielded little of value to his design philosophy still broadened up his perspective.

He sampled the diversity of opinions of various different Journeymen, each with their different design philosophies, backgrounds, achievements and more.

He also heard a diversity of opinions that opened up his mind to how others perceived a problem in a different way.

"Still, the most valuable insights are still the ones I've gained from my talk with Old Man Terrence."

Ves continually thought back on his exchange with the fading mech designer. Whether he wanted to confess his sins or give a younger mech designer a gift, the old man had been the most generous and open exchange partner up to this point.

Perhaps the single most important lesson he gained from this exchange was that there were two sides to every coin.

Neural interfaces opened up mechs for widespread application, but the dangers relating to their use still existed. The MTA and neural interface specialists merely conspired to understate the potential damage they still did to unwitting mech pilots.

Ves thought back on his own mechs and tried to think where their neural interfaces stood. Like almost any other mech designer, he defaulted to using the standard neural interface models, thinking that they were the safest option.

"Usually, I like to get something more exciting, but neural interfaces are too dangerous to mess around with. No mech designer wants to be culpable for the deaths of mech pilots due to dangerous interactions with tampered neural interfaces."

Yet something rotten hid beneath the innocent and harmless facades of standard neural interface models. Old Man Terrence's claims that the MTA engaged in manipulation at a very large scale by tweaking the limits of neural interface sounded very preposterous at first.

The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced.

He did his own research, of course. He tried to trawl the galactic net and the MTA's internal database, but he encountered no relevant data of this kind.

Ves sighed. "The MTA isn't stupid enough to publicize their dark experiments."

He turned his attention to studying the neural interface models instead. Utilizing his extremely basic understanding of neural interface technology, he tried to compare models of different generations and see whether the MTA shifted their limits.

So far, Ves found very little differences among the models used by the Komodo Star Sector. The tweaks were so minor that they wouldn't yield any measurable differences.

"Then again, a backwater star sector like ours doesn't merit any attention from the MTA."

He studied the neural interface models of other star sectors, particularly the ones prone to conflict and war.

Here, he spotted larger swings. The limits had been raised and lowered by as much as ten percent. Such a difference might not be huge, but over time they affected a lot of mech pilots!

After making this observation, Ves no longer doubted Old Man Terrence as much. At least on this point, he spoke the truth!

"He's probably right about all the other stuff he talked about as well."

A mixed expression overcame Ves as he thought about the danger his mechs posed to his customers.

"Risk is always accompanied by reward." He whispered.

The MTA thought long and hard about the relation between immersion and performance. Their overarching policy of developing as many high-ranking mech pilots as possible meant they chose to set the overall limits in the middle.

A lot of regular mech pilots accumulated brain damage as they continually interfaced with their mechs. Even expert pilots weren't exempt from these consequences!

"What is the value of a normal mech pilot compared to an expert pilot?"

The MTA's policy on neural interfaces revealed that they didn't care about the wellbeing of mortal mech pilots.

"Millions of brain-damaged mech pilots can't compare to a single expert pilot."

The human race consisted of an uncountable amount of individuals. Even if only 3.5 percent of them possessed the right genetic aptitude to pilot mechs, that was still an ungodly amount of potentates!

"The galaxy won't run out of normal mech pilots anytime soon!"

As long as mechs remained popular, new mech pilots always emerged. For this reason, the MTA readily treated them as expendable resources in order to generate as many expert pilots as possible from their ranks.

"Unlike mortal mech pilots, high-ranking mech pilots are far too rare."

Attrition was the number one reason why the MTA constantly sought to increase the amount of expert pilots. Too many of them died in battle over the course of their careers. The difficulty of extending their lifespan was another reason why it became so hard to maintain their numbers.

Even less got to live to ace pilot. Those that did had a very long road ahead before they could even have a chance to advance to reach the apex of mech piloting.

"It says something that only a hundred or so known god pilots exist, almost the same as the amount of known Star Designers in the entire galaxy!"

Even if numerous more god pilots existed in secret, their absolute numbers shouldn't be much more than the entirety of the Avatars of Myth!

Considering the immense size of the galaxy, that was still a depressingly small amount!

The MTA obviously pursued a risky policy with a very significant human cost in order to increase the amount of god pilots.

If there weren't enough expert pilots, there wouldn't be enough ace pilots! If there weren't enough ace pilots, then the number of god pilots that existed would never increase!

In fact, they would probably decrease, because even god pilots still died in battle every now and then! Just because their moniker contained the word 'god' did not mean they were unkillable!

"Even gods are not exempt from attrition!"

Chapter 1368 For the Bes

Ves had thought long and hard about the ethical conundrum with regards to neural interfaces.

If he really wanted to, he could opt to use slightly different neural interface models popular in other regions of the galaxy that possessed higher or lower limits.

While this course of action would definitely arouse some suspicion of the MTA, Ves figured it was fine as long as he stuck to MTA-approved models.

He could also do nothing at all and continue using the neural interface models that were prevalent in the Komodo Star Sector.

To be honest, Ves still leaned towards the status quo.

Certainly, he found the MTA's policies to be abhorrent. They decided the limits themselves while withholding crucial information and agency in their own risk exposure.

It was for their own good. If too much hysteria emerged about the safety of neural interfaces, then how many potentates would still choose to pursue a career in piloting mechs?

As many potentates as possible had to be pushed into piloting mechs! All of the privileges, honor and high regard associated with mech pilots were there for a very good reason.

Without sufficient tangible and intangible rewards, not enough people actually chose to risk their lives in battle!

With so many potentates reluctant to become mech pilots, the last thing the MTA needed was people casting doubt on the safety of neural interfaces!

"It's no surprise then that the MTA expects more from mech pilots." Ves muttered.

By setting the limits higher, expert pilots emerged in higher numbers, but at the cost of an uncountable amount of worn-out mech pilots who accumulated significant brain damage in the later stages of their career!

Ves even believed that unsafe safety standards may have played a role in forcing his grandfather Benjamin to fall from grace!

"My grandpa used to be an expert pilot, but then he regressed."

His grandfather didn't like to talk about it. For an expert pilot at the prime of his career to suffer a devastating battle injury at that point was very painful.

Though Benjamin seemed to have made peace with his descent, Ves nonetheless found it to be a huge pity, especially in light of the information he received.

"If neural interfaces were safer, would my grandpa still be an expert pilot?" He mused.

Another question was whether Benjamin Larkinson would have advanced to expert pilot in the first place if he made use of safer neural interface models.

Ves didn't know the answer to those questions. His inability to make a solid argument against the MTA's stance meant that he did not strongly object to them. In their view, they made the right choices.

"But is it the right choice for me as well?"

If Ves never met with Old Man Terrence, he would have guiltlessly kept making use of whatever neural interface models the MTA shoved down his throat.

Yet now that this blasted old mech designer pried open his eyes, Ves could no longer pretend ignorance.

"Thanks for that, old geezer." Ves scoffed.

He imagined that plaguing him with guilt and doubt was probably a funny game to Terrence Reedan. Ves both hated and appreciated the Chukan mech designer for enlightening him to the ugly truth.

Ves now faced a very difficult question. Should he condone an unsafe practice for the good of society, or should he reject it in order to protect his own vulnerable customers?

His brows continued to furrow as he struggled with his decision.

"Not every mech pilot aims to become an expert, ace or god pilot." He reminded himself.

Part of that was because the chances of any mech pilot to break through to expert candidate was low.

Even so, only a portion of mech pilots seriously wished to advance their careers. A lot of mech pilots simply saw it as a phase in their lives, a job they performed out of duty or to earn a lot of money.

It didn't help that potentates exclusively attended mech academies, which almost solely focused on teaching mech piloting skills.

As for other subjects such as history, language, economics and more? Forget about it! Mech pilots should only seek to pilot mechs, not become a professor of economics or such nonsense!

Though the MTA and various states pushed as many potentates into becoming mech pilots, the people in question were not always so enthusiastic about risking their lives.

"These people are only in it to earn their paychecks and secure their generous benefits."

Ves did not begrudge their lack of commitment. It was just the way they were. The problem was that mech pilots with a 'nine-to-five' attitude suffered the brunt of the consequences of the MTA's perverse policies.

Unsafe neural interfaces benefited ambitious mech pilots the most, granting them a greater chance to break through to expert candidate and beyond!

As for the more casual mech pilots? Their brains aged and degraded faster, which meant that they spent less time enjoying their comfortable retirements!

No mech pilot was the same. An enormous variety of people existed who piloted mechs for a living. The MTA conveniently ignored this reality by unilaterally adopting a one-size-fits-all solution.

Ves chuckled to himself. "Now, I'm pretty much doing the same thing."

In an ideal situation, he would give mech pilots the choice to set their own safety limits. Yet that entailed disclosing the actual risks of piloting mechs to his customers.

While it was the right thing to inform his customers, Ves believed the MTA would resolutely stop him if he did!

To the MTA, telling mech pilots how some neural interfaces models wrecked their brains faster was the wrong thing to do!

Forget about providing mech pilots with the opportunity to make an informed choice! As many potentates had to be pushed into piloting mechs as possible, all for the sake of producing more high-ranking mech pilots!

As a mere mech designer, Ves lacked the power to resist the MTA's will. Seeing how much effort they made into nurturing as many expert pilots as possible, Ves was sure that this was one line that he absolutely couldn't cross!

Bereft with the option of giving mech pilots the choice, Ves found himself in the unenviable position of making this important choice in their stead.

"Most of my mech designs so far are aimed at advanced mech pilots."

The Blackbeak, Crystal Lord and Aurora Titan models all demanded a lot out of their mech pilots. For this reason, the main users of his products consisted of more ambitious mech pilots.

"If I take my current customers into account, then sticking to the status quo is fine."

This might change if he ever ventured into cheaper mechs. If he designed a budget mech or a so-called 'economy mech', then he shouldn't expect too much from the mech pilots that get to pilot them into battle.

Utilizing safer and more limited neural interfaces with cheaper mechs was the most appropriate choice.

Yet... did he really wish to gimp some his mechs?

Ves oddly disagreed with this notion. Even if his mechs slowly accelerated the deterioration of the health of many of his mech pilots, was it worth it for him to rob them of the opportunity to earn greater glory?

Another factor complicated his consideration. Unlike many other mech designers whose specialties possessed little relation to neural interfaces, Ves was deeply dependent on their parameters!

Safer and more limited neural interfaces may curtail much of the damage that mech pilots regularly accrued over time, but they also limited the benefits provided by the X-Factor!

"The shallower the immersion, the weaker the interaction!"

While Ves had not tested this relationship in a rigorous experiment, according to his existing knowledge, the X-Factor was strongly related to the depth of the man-machine connection!

"It's like comparing a long-distance relationship to a physical relationship! The two can't be compared!"

For this reason, his mechs performed vastly better in the hands of his mech pilots if their neural interfaces possessed very liberal safety limits. The less constrained the neural interface, the greater the potential for symbiosis!

If Ves made the decision to transition to safer neural interfaces, then he would basically be shooting himself in the foot. The degree of interconnectedness between the mech and mech pilot would be subject to many limitations.

"The famed piloting experience of my mechs will be a lot more muted than before! Mech pilots will notice the difference and think I've lost my touch!"

This would be an absolute disaster! After years of strengthening the X-Factor of his mechs, making use of safer neural interfaces would mean that the X-Factor would be subject to artificial caps!

"It's like lowering the ceiling of a house so that only dwarves can live in it! Who wants to live in such a tiny home?"

Nobody except dwarves and those who liked to crawl on their feet!

If Ves wanted to maintain his principal competitive advantage and preserve the unique strength of his products, then he should not opt for neural interfaces with more stringent safety constraints.

In fact, he should do the opposite!

"While it doesn't apply to everyone, for me, it's better if I aim for greater potency!"

Neural interfaces that allowed for greater immersion and depth of connectivity meant that the mech pilots that used his products grew much closer to them! This would likely lead to a substantially greater effective performance than before!

His eyes lit up at the thought. "For regular mech designers, looser limits will only yield modest gains at an increasingly greater cost. But the calculus is different in my case!"

Because of the properties of his specialty, a deeper neural interface connection directly correlated to a greater interaction with the design spirit of his mechs!

To put it in a simpler way, unsafe neural interfaces directly amplified the effects of the X-Factor of his mechs!

The realization exploded in his mind like a bomb. Ves always knew his design philosophy depended heavily on the man-machine connection, but only now did he understand that he could precisely manipulate its effects by messing with the neural interfaces of his mechs!

Ves tried to envision what would happen if he adopted riskier neural interfaces. The rate of brain damage and other adverse consequences would increase among his customers.

However, many of them also stood to enjoy a lot more gains from using his products!

"The effective performance of regular mech pilots will increase! As for those who already perform well, their chances of breaking through are doubtlessly greater!"

To the MTA and almost every other mech designer, the most optimal balance lay somewhere in the middle between absolute safety and reckless potency.

Yet to Ves, his mechs became so much more with this change. Their true potential would be unlocked as many mech pilots enjoyed a greater degree of symbiosis!

Another thought briefly interrupted his glee at the possibilities. One of Old Man Terrence's warnings came to the forefront.

"There are always two sides to the same coin!"

Loosening the safety limits paved the way for greater symbiosis, but also greater adverse side effects! On top of the known side effects, mech pilots also became exposed to greater risk if they happened to be incompatible with the design spirits of their mechs!

The possibility momentarily sobered him up. "If the mech pilot hates his mech and vice versa, then the damage the mech pilot suffers will be amplified as well!"

However... Ves found it hard to care about mech pilots who clashed with their mechs. If the design spirit hated a mech pilot to the point where it actually harmed the individual, then it was probably justified!

Ves found out that he didn't mind it if his mechs wanted to harm or kill their own mech pilots!

"My mechs demand respect!" He exclaimed. "The stupid mech pilots have it coming if they fail to heed this warning!"

Less and less objections stood in the way for him to transition to using unsafe neural interfaces. Even though he essentially took the MTA's heartless stance and took it into a more extreme direction, Ves did not feel guilty for making this determination.

Deep in his heart, he believed he was making the right choice for his customers!

"Mech pilots will thank me for this decision!"

As Ves exulted over his brilliant decision, he quickly came across a great idea.

While all of this theorizing was great and all, who knew whether his assumptions panned out. What better way than to test his theories by applying it on his upcoming mech design?

His eyes lit up as he began to recall the progress he made on his incomplete smart metal tiger mech design.

"With the changes I have in mind, my mech will be even more autonomous and lifelike! Hahahahaha!"

Chapter 1369 Unshackled Mech

Over the past couple of months, Ves still hadn't finalized the draft design of his speculative smart metal tiger mech design.

Normally, he was quite decisive, but this time he frequently doubted his choices.

He couldn't help it as it was truly difficult to incorporate smart metal to a tiger mech in a meaningful way.

He supposed he could have saved himself a lot of trouble by choosing another bestial mech type.

He didn't want to, though. The stubborn part of his mind flared up whenever he thought about giving and switching to something that meshed much better with smart metal technology.

"Sure, I'd have an easier time if I design a spaceborn squid mech with tentacles made entirely out of smart metal, but where is the fun in that?"

One of the reasons why he stuck with the unfortunate combination of properties was because he wanted to challenge himself. Even though he sometimes felt that he bit off more than he could chew, he still persisted with his decision.

Over the past few weeks in between transit, Ves had continued to refine and revise his draft design. He continually tweaked the amounts of smart metal replacing or augmented the conventional subcomponents of his design.

Even as he tinkered with his design, he always felt he was missing something. His initial intention was to design a mech that provided its design spirit with a greater degree of agency.

Handing over control of the smart metal tail of the tiger mech to the design spirit was an inspired choice of his. Yet now that he came up with his new realizations, he intended to upgrade his vision for his unnamed tiger mech!

Ves leaned back in his chair and activated the integrated signal jammer that Crindon recently installed in his stateroom.

"Sorry Gloriana, no free show for you! Sorry MTA, this little design is not for your eyes!"

Only then did he call up his current draft design. As he stared at his current work, he already started to plan the adjustments he wanted to make in light of his new realizations.

"Let's start with the basics. The premise of my tiger mech is that it is a mech that can both think and act for itself to an extent."

Different from his other mech designs where people only indirectly perceived their liveliness, his next mech design marked a very radical change in direction.

He wanted to steer his design philosophy closer to the path of life! He wanted to explore some of the potential this path had to offer! Rather than treat his mech designs as passive, invisible participants in the mech piloting experience, Ves wanted to bring it out to the forefront!

He wanted his mechs to truly live up to his ideals and the name of his mech company!

"How can the products of the Living Mech Corporation still be static and mechanical?" He quietly lamented. "It's time for me to crawl out of my shell and showcase some of the promise of my design philosophy!"

His decision to stop hiding and reveal the tricks he could do extended to more than what he already decided. Letting the design spirit assume a limited degree of direct control over the mech was tame compared to his next design choice!

"Hmph." He smirked. "Since Old Man Terrence calls neural interface technology the devil's technology, then why not embrace this aspect? My next design shall be called the Devil Tiger!"

Devil Tiger!

Ves only envisioned producing a single copy of this mech, yet that did not reduce the impact of its potentially-seminal design. If the innovations that Ves introduced in the mech panned out, then he had no doubt that it had the potential to become another legendary mech like his renowned Transcendent Messengers!

The key property of the mech concept of his Devil Tiger design was to remove some of the safety limitations that ordinary protected both the mech and mech pilot!

"Rather than be afraid of the unknown, let's embrace it! Hahahaha!"

He envisioned his Devil Tiger as a double-edged sword. When wielded properly, it was able to perform fantastically. The potential of his mech might even be greater than that of the Aurora Titan or Transcendent Messenger if everything went right!

However, if the mech pilot of the Devil Tiger clashed with its design spirit, then there were lots of ways for the mech to hamper the individual in question!

"This is the price that must be paid by giving the mech more agency!"

Piloting this mech was like making a deal with the devil. Only by keeping the devil pleased would the mech pilot continue to derive a great amount of benefit from piloting the mech!

"Hehehehe. Hahahaha. Hahahaha!"

Ves occasionally burst out in laughter as he thought of how great and terrible his next mech design would be! He intended to propel it into a unique mech of which had never existed before in the history of mech design! How could he not feel excited?!

His wild and audacious vision of his Devil Tiger stoked his enthusiasm and passion to greater heights! He became fully engaged with his design project and no longer muddled over the choices he needed to make.

"First, let's solve the problem with regards to smart metal!"

Ves wanted to design a mech suited for the environment of Mournshell in the Nyxian Gap. The chaotic but resource-rich planet hosted numerous different

outfits, each of them competing over the bounty of exotics that regularly crashed on its tectonically-unstable surface.

He rubbed his chin. "In the Nyxian Gap and in the vicinity of Mournshell, ready access to repair facilities are absent. Just like the scum in the frontier, I doubt the treasure hunters, dark mercenaries and pirates are any good in servicing technologically-advanced machines!"

This served as a very big constraint to Ves. On the other hand, he could also turn it around and see it in a different light.

"Repairability and ease of maintenance is key in the Nyxian Gap!"

For example, a mech like the Aurora Titan might perform great in such an environment at first. Its quality and performance parameters were head and shoulders above the trash mechs the Nyxian pirates predominantly used.

Yet after a few months of occasional battles, the outfit that fielded such an extravagant mech would begin to run out of spare parts and materials.

The expensive alloys that made up its structure couldn't be sourced from some grungy, poorly-supplied pirate station in the middle of the Nyxian Gap.

The armor compressor required to produce new armor plating to replace the broken ones couldn't be operated by any casual mech technician. Only a specialist in alloy compression could operate one without too many errors that resulted in a lot of expensive failures.

"Such specialized personnel is probably hard to find in the Nyxian Gap." He muttered. "Obtaining an armor compressor is also a relatively big burden to an outfit."

In short, any mech designed to perform well in the Nyxian Gap couldn't be too expensive and sophisticated! The 'target audience' for his Devil Tiger were simply too poor and stupid to maintain a high-performance mech!

"However, this is only the case with standard mechs! What if the mech is entirely different? What if it's made out of much more smart metal than I envisioned?"

Ves looked at his draft design and waved his hand, causing all of his previous progress to be wiped away! He didn't intend to develop this early version any further! Instead, he wanted to start anew with a more radical concept for his smart metal tiger mech design!

"My Devil Tiger won't be a conventional mech. Not every performance specification is important. The key is to make my mech durable and sustainable in an environment that features poor logistics and a lack of skilled personnel!"

He made a big mistake with his previous draft design. He sketched a mech design that was far too complex for the Nyxian Gap. While the notorious area featured a handful of outfits and mech pilots who could give elites a run for their money, they were the exception rather than the rule.

"I can't assume that whoever gets to pilot my mech is as skilled as a Larkinson mech pilot and has access to a competent maintenance crew."

Prioritizing speed, power, armor and so on was a mistake. A much higher proportion of mechs in the Nyxian Gap consisted of salvaged rust buckets or third-hand mechs, so why should he aim for a high level of performance?

What mattered more was whether a mech would last. First, their endurance had to be at least decent. Resupplying in the varied environments of the Nyxian Gap was extremely hard, so mechs needed to be able to last for at least a standard day without requiring replenishment.

Second, it had to be easy to service by lower-skilled mech technicians. Ves had to pick relatively simple parts that made use of cheap exotics that were prevalent in the Nyxian Gap.

He also had to find an alternative to using compressed armor plating. As much as its addition enormously increased the durability of a mech, it was still beyond the reach of most pirate outfits.

Third, it had to be easy to pilot. In the mech community, tiger mechs gained a reputation for being fairly easy to learn but hard to master. It shouldn't be too much of a problem for Ves to keep the tiger mech accessible to lower-skilled mech pilots.

At the very least, the active design spirit ought to be able to lend a hand if the mech pilot happened to fall short at times.

"Perhaps even those with a lower grade of genetic aptitude will be able to pilot my mech proficiently!"

Of course, that was an exaggeration. Ves did not think he would be able to solve the problem that Old Man Terrence wasted his entire life trying to resolve.

"The point is my Devil Tiger has to offer great power but without most of the burden!"

That didn't mean he wanted to design a junk mech though. Even if the System let him get away with it, Ves himself disdained developing a crappy mech!

His Devil Tiger had to be strong and awe-inspiring in order to be the legendary mech that he envisioned!

How could he make his mech both easy to work with and powerful at the same time?

"Money! It all comes down to money!"

Ves changed his mind about not investing too much in his Devil Tiger design. He had become too invested in its vision to stop halfway. A great mech deserved to contain some valuable traits.

He raised a finger and began to sketch his new draft design. The tiger mech that took shape looked almost identical to the previous design he discarded.

The most important difference however was that instead of containing a little bit of smart metal here and there, almost its entire insides consisted of the substance!

With the sheer amount of smart metal he included in the mech, reaching the target of thirty percent was a breeze, but Ves did not aim so low this time.

He wanted to design a true smart metal mech!

"It's not enough! At least sixty percent of my mech has to be made out of smart metal! Even the core components such as the power reactor, engine and large parts of the cockpit has to be made out of smart metal!"

The non-smart metal portions of the mech would only be reserved for components that absolutely couldn't be replaced with the smart metal he had access to. As for the armor plating of the mech, Ves had something special in mind.

"The entire surface of Mournshell is littered with junk and various useful exotics. Why not make my mech's exterior adaptable so that it can incorporate some of these materials? It's brilliant! Hahahahaha!"

This was one of the key features of his Devil Tiger! He wanted it to grow with time and continually improve itself!

"Instead of growing weaker, my Devil Tiger has to be a mech that continuously grows stronger over time! It will never become outdated!"

Chapter 1370 ASMAS

Ves came up with a very ambitious reimagining of his smart metal tiger mech. Not only did it have to be truly alive in a sense, it also had to be capable of continuous growth and evolution!

He wanted to achieve this without imposing too many demands on the owners of his mech. This meant that Ves couldn't rely too much on the competence of the maintenance crew that had to service the Devil Tiger.

In order to accomplish this, Ves opted to apply two measures that solved this particular problem.

"First, I'll impart some of my knowledge, particularly on metallurgy, to the design spirit!"

This way, his mech could skillfully repair itself without relying on the idiots or the enslaved to repair the damage to the mech after an arduous battle!

"Second, the exterior of my mech has to have a form of smart metal at its base that can assimilate various materials and exotics! It has to be able to replenish itself as well in the right conditions!"

Ves knew that such products existed, but they were prohibitively expensive! They only started showing up in second-class mechs, so for him to get his hands on adaptable smart metal armor plating was easier said than done!

The immense cost and other practical problems associated with his increasingly ambitious design project shocked him out of his excited state.

He palmed his face. "The devil is in the detail! It's all well and good to daydream about a fantastic mech, but how in the hell am I supposed to get it all together?"

Ves got so caught up in his imagination that he lost sight of his limitations! He made the same mistakes of a mech design student who just pieced some shiny parts together!

He calmed down as he tried to figure out how he could possibly obtain the most critical material, which was the adaptable smart metal armor system, or ASMAS!

"ASMAS is not only expensive, but very hard to obtain."

It sounded like a wonder material. ASMAS basically consisted of nanomachine goop that possessed basic material processing capabilities. If Ves threw a bucket of the goop at a junkyard, the nanomachines would follow its programming and scour the piles of junk for the best materials to form the best possible armor plating that was within their means to create.

Smart metal specialists developed ASMAS as a means to create a mech that required little to no actual maintenance and could subside on the field for years.

To their credit, they succeeded. Only, the price associated with this tech was very prohibitive.

In order to impart material processing capabilities at the microscopic level to a bunch of nanomachines, their complexity had reached an insane height. In order to even make it all possible, each nanomachine had to incorporate numerous traces of medium or even high-grade exotics!

In other words, to form the initial goop of ASMAS, Ves had to make an incredibly expensive investment just to get a bucket of this substance!

"This is also the main reason why no one is afraid that ASMAS will perpetually self-replicate and turn into a grey goo like threat."

There was another reason why grey goo attacks often failed. Plenty of crazies attempted to destroy a planet or even the entire galaxy by unleashing a plague of grey goo.

However, while smart metal could accomplish amazing things, at its base it merely consisted of a huge bunch of nanomachines!

"Sticking 'nano' in front of a machine doesn't make it any less of a machine! Every machine can be hacked, particularly those that depend heavily on connectivity and coordination!"

To be fair, the developers of smart metal did their best to make it as difficult as possible to hack their products. Nonetheless, their vulnerability towards hacking was a very huge reason why smart metal never took off in the galaxy.

There was only one exception. Mechs were notoriously difficult to hack because of the man-machine connection. As long as the smart metal hopped on to the man-machine connection, it became a bit less susceptible to hacking.

Normally, this was due to the human mind connected to the smart metal.

However, in the case of the Devil Tiger, Ves believed he may be able to achieve the same effect for his mech by tying the smart metal to the design spirit of the mech.

"That's yet another assumption I have to put to the test." He muttered.

In short, ASMAS was not only problematic to procure, but also difficult to replenish.

When smart metal mechs sustained damage, chunks of smart metal could easily be separated and thrown from the mech frames. Sometimes, the separated ASMAS could merge back into the mech, but if the nanomachines suffered too much damage, then the damaged mech could salvage only a little bit of exotics.

"What is the point of using an ASMAS mech when it can't repair itself anymore after a few months of battle?"

That was far from years of continuous use that the inventors of ASMAS envisioned!

Fortunately, the proponents of this tech already devised a solution to this problem. Perhaps the original exotics might be hard to source, but as long as someone shoveled a bunch of inferior substitute materials to the ASMAS, then its volume could partially be restored.

"It's only a substitute though. Compared to factory-fresh ASMAS, the substitute ASMAS isn't nearly as good in processing and adapting different materials."

ASMAS mechs had to maintain a minimum level of pure ASMAS in order to retain all of its essential functionality.

After several generations of development, ASMAS mechs got better and better at preserving pure ASMAS. Most of the time, it deployed substitute ASMAS closer to the exterior of the mech. The valuable pure ASMAS would be sequestered deep in the core of the mech, only to be brought out once the fighting stopped in order to facilitate repairs.

Ves scratched his chin. "This is one way to make an ASMAS mech more affordable. Instead of turning sixty percent of the mech into pure ASMAS, I can instead split that up. Perhaps I can get by a tenth as much on the expensive kind of ASMAS, while leaving the rest to substitute ASMAS!"

This potentially lowered the lifespan of the mech, but as long as the mech and mech pilot didn't suffer catastrophic damage, the pure ASMAS could last for a very long time.

Ves knew because he already read about it before. Some ASMAS mechs lasted for as much as decades! With smarter use, the pure ASMAS could last even longer!

"This is a good basis for my Devil Tiger!"

He made his decision. Even if it was expensive to get his hands on a starter batch of pure ASMAS, he had to do his best to obtain enough of it to form the basis of his tiger mech!

"With this much pure ASMAS and substitute ASMAS, my Devil Tiger will become a true smart metal mech!"

In order to realize his vision, he had to break one of his rules and spend an extravagant amount of money to obtain a few barrels worth of pure ASMAS.

Nonetheless, just because he resorted to something expensive to solve a specific problem didn't mean he no longer faced any challenges regarding his design project.

Mech design was all about making the best use of the tech and materials at someone's disposal!

"A good cook can turn cheap ingredients into a tasty meal. A bad cook will make expensive ingredients taste bad!"

As long as Ves made skillful use of the ingredients he obtained, the resulting 'meal' tasted good regardless of the cost!

"I have to be careful not to waste the ingredients." Ves furrowed his brows. "I don't even know if I can even obtain some in the Sentinel Kingdom."

The actual utility of ASMAS technology had always been rather niche. For the price of a single ASMAS mech, a mech buyer might as well buy ten regular mechs instead that performed just as well!

Ves considered whether he should just beg Gloriana to help him obtain the necessary amount of pure ASMAS.

He shook his head. "Not yet. I don't want to owe her any more than I already do. There ought to be a way for me to get the ASMAS on my own."

For now, he pushed the matter aside. He still had a long way to go before he finished the design.

A few hours went by as Ves continued to sketch and fill in some of the details of his draft design.

His artistic inclination came to the fore. He tweaked the external appearance of his mech to convey its devilish, double-edged nature.

"The Devil Tiger is a predator! It's a mech purely designed to kill!"

The predominant shade of his devil tiger was red. Along with its sharp black tiger stripes, the mech looked like a beast that had clawed itself straight out of hell!

The snarling maw, the sharp and unnerving tail, the devastating claws, the menacing contours and so on all contributed to a look that might one day inspire dread on the battlefield!

"Best of all, its appearance can change over time!"

Due to the properties of ASMAS, the shape and configuration of the Devil Tiger was not set in stone. The materials it absorbed and the programming that Ves planned to convey would give the mech the option to choose its own evolution.

As for who got to decide how the mech evolved over time?

"Not the mech pilot!"

Ves did not aim his mech at any specific mech pilot. The Devil Tiger was all about the mech for once! Whoever got to pilot it was just a body to enable its design spirit to do what it wanted, including directing the evolution of the Devil Tiger!

"Ah, but there's the rub."

Getting his hands on sufficient quantities of pure ASMAS was one major challenge to his design project.

The second challenge was to form the right design spirit for his Devil Tiger!

Due to all of the demands he posed to his mech, he couldn't make do with self-constructed images! He had to resort to a potent spiritual fragment in order to make the choices he wanted his mech to make!

"It has to be strong, at least as strong as the one I used for the Transcendent Messenger!"

These kinds of design spirits were fairly difficult to come by. He could probably make do if he obtained some kind of relic or other object that received a lot of worship in order to refine its spiritual accumulation into something useful.

He frowned. "I can't pick up any random object, though. It has to be related to cat or tiger-like species!"

This was a very specific demand! Ves didn't even know if such an object existed anywhere in this corner of the star sector!

"There's got to be at least somewhere in the local region which worships tigers. If that doesn't work, I'll just make do with something related to house cats if necessary! It's not like anyone will notice the difference!"

Lucky would approve.

In fact, now that he thought about his pet, he wondered whether he could borrow some of Lucky's spirituality.

Ves quickly shook his head. "He'll claw my face off my head if I make that suggestion!"

Aside from finding a spiritually-powerful cat-like creature or a totem object related to such species, Ves had few options to go on. He planned to perform

some very thorough research in the next few days to see if he could obtain a source for the Devil Tiger's design spirit.

"It has to be strong! The stronger the source, the stronger the spiritual fragment! The stronger the fragment, the more expressive and lifelike my mech can get!"

His Devil Tiger was destined to be a very deviant mech design. Ves did not intend to implement all of the innovations he implemented in the Devil Tiger to his legal mech designs. He merely wanted to test his assumptions and see how his theories fared in an extreme situation.

"I have to make the most of this opportunity!"