

Chapter 1341 Overblown Fears

With the fleet's arrival to the Chuko Republic imminent, Ves decided to devote the remainder of his time on his current design project.

Ever since his recent enlightenment, his perspective on mech design and in particular his design philosophy had changed.

He developed the inkling of a theoretical framework to place his work into a more understandable context.

"Each mech I've designed up until now sits squarely between the path of determinism and the path of life." He observed while steepling his fingers above his desk.

Like any other mech designer, he started walking the path of determinism. Yet as soon as he developed his design philosophy, he started shuffling away from the path of determinism and approached the path of life.

This shift in direction happened very gradually when Ves mostly worked with his self-created images.

That changed one day when his mother showed him a new facet of spirituality.

By gifting him with the spiritual fragment of the long-dead crystal builder leader, Ves veered sharply towards the path of life.

Ever since then, he had been moving further away from the path of determinism in order to refine his usage of spiritual fragments.

Right now, Ves believed there was much more he could gain by exploring this direction further. He just had to make sure he didn't commit too much and lose sight of his vocation.

"Whatever I do, I should always remember that I'm a mech designer. Everything I do is meant to improve my mech designs."

He wanted to utilize his new insights and put them to the test. He wanted to explore what the path of life had to offer.

He theorized that it may be possible to utilize the design spirits of his mechs in another fashion.

While their presence enhances and breathes into mechs through the X-Factor, what if they affected a mech more directly?

What if Ves followed the logical train of thought that was central to the path of life? What if he gave his design spirits more direct control over the mech?

"Not completely. Just a portion."

He had just the idea.

Recently, he hadn't made a lot of progress in designing his smart metal tiger mech. He still lacked a good vision based on a viable mech concept.

Now, he was starting to have ideas. Radical ideas. Good ideas. Bad ideas.

With the path of life illuminated before him, he wanted to unearth more of its potential.

What better way to make mechs more alive than actually allowing them to express themselves?

His existing methods wouldn't change. He still intended to work with design spirits to empower the X-Factor of his mechs.

Yet that wasn't enough for him. Not anymore.

"One of the biggest weaknesses of my methods is that too many mech pilots are clueless on how to maximize their use."

By necessity, Ves always obscured his usage of the X-Factor. He resorted to euphemisms, misdirections and outright lies in order to hide the fact that he was making use of a facet that many mech designers could only dream of using.

Yet.. was it still necessary for him to be so circumspect now?

Ves smirked. "Not anymore. My situation is completely different now."

In the early days, Ves always imagined that he needed to hide his secrets to the death. He imagined he could only be more open about his secrets when he gained more strength and fame.

When he was still a Novice or an Apprentice, he was deeply afraid that the MTA or some unscrupulous mech designers would kidnap him and lock him up in their dungeons to extract his golden secrets.

Now that he became a Journeyman and became more exposed of the thinking within the MTA and the high-ranking mech design community, he realized that his concerns had been overblown.

"It's not that they're interested, but it is not worth making a move."

The Mech Trade Association may have turned into a pushy galaxy-spanning behemoth that imposed a lot of rules, but at its core it was still a trade and industry association. Its main purpose was to govern and regulate the mech industry and the mech market.

Every mech designer barring those on the run or gone pirate fell within their governance. Whether a mech designer became an internal or external member, they frequently submitted their mechs and designs to the MTA for certification or validation.

"This essentially means that they can track every mech designer's progress." He muttered.

All of the data they collected was probably being used to constantly evaluate a mech designer's worth. Perhaps they also tasked others to figure out the mechanisms behind their design philosophy in order to broaden the knowledge pool of the entire mech industry.

In essence, many mech designers already donated much of their data to the MTA! Rather than hoarding their design schematics and such, they freely submitted it to the MTA in order to receive their seals of approval!

"There's nothing inherently wrong with this scheme. It's a voluntary and mutually beneficial transaction!"

Ves admired the insidious ingenuity of the MTA. If mech designers had their way, they would have hoarded all of their secrets to their deaths. But by offering various attractive incentives, they managed to entice every legitimate mech designer into offering the Association some very close looks at their works.

No one got worse off. Ves had submitted a handful of mech designs to the MTA for validation and never felt very indignant about it. The practice was so normalized that every mech designers simply began to see it as something akin to submitting their homework for grading.

He scoffed. "The MTA just puts on a friendly teacher's coat and manages to deceive trillions of mech designers that they're just here to help."

As mech designers began to progress their design philosophies and become more formidable, the MTA keenly understood their development. How could they not when they could observe every change and improvement in the mech designs they submitted for validation?!

And when a valuable, high-ranking mech designer reached Master or neared the end of their lives, then the MTA could really pick up a bargain.

Due to the Big Two's monopoly on life-prolonging treatments, the MTA could simply dangle the opportunity to live another century more and receive the secrets they wanted in exchange for a procedure that was likely a lot cheaper to perform.

"Everyone wants to live longer."

The MTA knew this and invested a lot in keeping life-prolonging treatments in their own hands. Aside from the CFA and Five Scrolls Compact, they prevented anyone else from offering the same services.

Mech designers had no choice but to cough up their most valuable trade secrets. Not even Masters were exempt from this reality.

What Ves had learned from his visit at Centerpoint was that the MTA weren't interested in impermanent design philosophies. The trade secrets they valued the most were the ones that had been refined of all of their flaws and impurities and withstood the test of time.

Those who advanced to Master by realizing their design philosophies were the end products that the MTA truly sought for. As for the design philosophies that belonged to Journeymen and Seniors, the Association only slightly paid attention to them, but not to the point where they felt tempted to steal them in an underhanded manner.

Why steal an incomplete and underdeveloped design philosophy? It was akin to stealing a half-finished product that only displayed a fraction of their potential.

Not only that, but resorting to this move would definitely kill or ruin the mech designer they robbed, thereby stopping the incomplete design philosophy from developing any further!

The MTA was an immensely huge organization. It regularly interacted with countless mech designers, some of whom possessed very interesting design

philosophies. The Association encountered so many strange phenomena that they had the luxury to sit back and wait for some of them to be realized.

Until that happened, every Journeyman and Senior had very little to fear that the MTA would cast greedy eyes on their unfinished design philosophies.

The same applied to Ves, especially since he left a distorted impression of himself when he paid a visit to the sector headquarters.

Ves did not regret pretending to be a nutcase in front of Professor Oodiv of the MTA.

It was true that his ill-thought decision led to a host of unexpected outcomes. He never intended to acquire an obsessive girlfriend or encourage Master Olson to kick him out of the Friday Coalition.

Nonetheless, these changes weren't entirely bad. They also led to a host of advantages, so Ves did not feel the need to lament over the changes forced upon his life.

"The key is that I successfully achieved my primary goal."

The entire reason he painted his design philosophy in an awful light was to give the MTA a mistaken impression of his beliefs.

Now that he pulled it off, the MTA would probably dismiss most of his unique accomplishments as extensions of an insane and irrational design philosophy.

"If it works for the MTA, I can make it work for everyone else."

If Ves amped up his eccentricity, he would be able to make other mech designers discount him as well.

Even if he started incorporating weird applications of spirituality in his mech designs, it was still fine.

As long as they associated it with the negative stereotype of Class IX design philosophies, they would subconsciously dismiss the value of his accomplishments.

If by some chance a mech designer started to cast greedy eyes on his design philosophy, what could they do? It wasn't as if a Journeyman or Senior could abandon their life's work at the drop of the hat and replace it with another. Their design seeds wouldn't allow them to trash their original design philosophies!

Novices and Apprentices were still capable of adopting different design philosophies, but it was all moot as long as they hadn't advanced to Journeyman yet. For a low-ranking mech designer to steal a radical and unorthodox design philosophy and expect to advance was close to impossible!

In summary, whether it was the MTA or other mech designers, Ves did not have to be so afraid of them anymore. As long as he wore the coat of a stereotypical Class IX mech designer, he could get away with a lot more than he previously thought possible!

"Maybe this act isn't even necessary in the first place!"

Whatever. He had already chosen his course, and he figured that adding some extra insurance on top of the general apathy of rival mech designers couldn't hurt. With at least two layers of insurance protecting him, his chances of attracting trouble by showing off a radical expression of his design philosophy decreased immensely.

To a paranoid mech designer like Ves, this meant a lot!

"This will help me a lot in exploring the path of life."

Much of the potential of the path of life lay in its emphasis on making mechs more closely resemble living entities. While Ves did not outright desire turning

mechs into a new living species, he nonetheless expressed some interest into dipping his toes onto this fascinating path.

His next design would incorporate his first new innovation since he first made use of spiritual fragments.

His mind cast into his mental design space where he spontaneously envisioned his mech concept.

He began with imagining a standard-looking tiger mech. Once he fixated its overall shape and dimensions, he began to seek instances where he could cleverly incorporate smart metal.

"Although the overall structure has to be resilient enough to absorb the strong forces the bestial mech is subjected to, there is still a role for smart metal."

Smart metal was already used in many mechs, particularly more advanced ones, to act as shock absorbing cushions.

A simplified way of describing it was that mech designers used smart metal as very advanced springs. Unlike regular springs, they couldn't absorb as much overwhelming force in a single instance.

However, these smart metal shock absorbers possessed an advantage that regular shock absorbers lacked.

They could regenerate and self-repair. Once they absorbed so much shock that they broke, much of the force had already been absorbed. It had already performed its purpose in that instance.

Once the crisis had passed, the broken shock absorbers could easily piece themselves back together. Depending on the type of smart metal being used, this might happen in seconds, which was very crucial in intensive battles!

A tiger mech with constantly-regenerating shock absorbers could withstand a lot more chronic abuse than regular mechs! It would be a treasure on high-

gravity planets where every mech had to endure a continuous degree of heavy shocks!

"And that's not all!"

He hadn't even gotten to the fun part of his tiger mech, the part that showcased his new understanding of the path of life!

THE MECH TOUCH

Chapter 1342 Spiritual Automation

Now that he determined that he could be a lot more open about the applications of his design philosophy, he wanted to design something that could make a splash.

"Starting with my tiger mech is a good idea."

He did not intend to proliferate its design. Merely producing a single copy should be enough for him to complete both of his Upgrade Missions.

For this reason, he began to consider his upcoming design project as something more than a way to explore a couple of unfamiliar directions in mech design.

He saw it as a golden opportunity to perform a bold experiment.

An experiment related to the path of life.

The premise of his idea was simple. Rather than relegating his design spirits in the background and limit them to influencing the performance of a mech through the X-Factor, why not allow them to control a portion of a mech directly?

"It's like automation, but on a different level!"

Every mech incorporated at least some form of automation. It was unavoidable as a single human mind couldn't possibly control every single variable of a complex war machine.

Yet the automation that Ves had in mind went much further than that. With the design spirit acting in place of an AI or automated routine, he wanted to give it sole, tangible control over a limb!

"And maybe even more limbs!"

A tiger mech possessed five limbs.

Its front and rear limbs played an essential role in the locomotion of the machine. Ves did not intend to mess with the mech pilot's control over those essential limbs.

He instead directed his attention to the often-neglected rear limb, the tail.

"Many mech designers even leave that out entirely."

Organic tigers used them as means of communication and a way to help them balance their bodies during maneuvers.

Mechs that adopted the body shape of tigers had no need for those functions. Mech designers could tweak the body structure of a tiger mech to make the balancing function of a tail redundant. As for the communication function, the signalling function of a tail only played a role in situations where there was very strong jamming or where any conventional communication attempts might signal the enemy as well.

Some mech designers even turned the tail of a tiger mech into a strong antenna that amplified their communication capabilities.

Nonetheless, most mech designers merely added tails to a tiger mech because that was what their customers expected. Seeing a tiger mech without a tail was a slightly jarring sight so some mech pilots. Even if it made the mech more expensive, they insisted on adding articulating tails to their mechs because they wouldn't have the illusion of embodying a giant tiger machine without this cosmetic limb!

For his current design project, Ves planned to turn the tail of his tiger mech into a smart metal limb. Not only that, but he planned to give full rein of it over to the design spirit!

"It'll be an autonomous tail controlled by an entity other than the mech pilot of the automated systems of the mech!" He exulted. "For the first time, my mechs can finally express themselves more directly! They'll be able to influence reality without asking for permission from their mech pilots!"

He called it spiritual automation! Of course, he would refer to it as metaphysical automation in public if anyone asked.

He couldn't wait to see what the mech community thought of this novel addition to his mechs. The new application he came up with was so crazy and radical that Ves couldn't help but erupt in laughter!

"Hahahahaha!"

"Hahahahahahahahaha!"

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"Meow?!"

Lucky, who was leisurely dozing off on his desk, suddenly jerked up his feet. After seeing his owner getting drunk off one of his insane ideas again, he decided it was best to go elsewhere for a while.

Who knew what craziness Ves might do next! Lucky wanted no part of his dumb schemes!

"Meow!"

As Lucky phased through the deck as fast as he could, Ves subsided from his laughter.

It was all well and good to exult in his ideas, but without putting them into action, it was wholly premature of him to rest on his laurels.

"I still have a lot of work to do in designing the mech." He stated, centering his focus away from his previous rush.

Though his earlier conduct was a little shameful, the outburst succeeded in invigorating his drive. With his passion fired up, he deeply wanted his next design project to succeed!

However, designing his mech was easier said than done. If he wanted to meet the demands of both his Upgrade Missions at once, then he had to turn at least thirty percent of his tiger mech into smart metal.

"Incorporating smart metal shock absorbers in a typical tiger mech will only net me five percent at most." He surmised. "It might be possible for me to double it if I tweak the design to maximize their use."

That still left him with twenty percent to go. He supposed he might be able to turn additional components or subcomponents of his tiger mech into smart metal.

"Certain sections of the limbs can be turned into smart metal as well." He thoughtfully rubbed his chin. "It's best if I turn certain sections of armor into smart metal as well, but the cost of doing so is prohibitive for third-class mechs."

Smart metal used as armor had to be formed out of exceptional materials. Their license costs were also high, though Ves didn't care since he planned to pirate the necessary licenses anyway.

"Even if I'm prepared to invest a lot of money in this project, it's best to keep it as limited as possible."

The incorporation of smart metal meant that regardless of what he designed, it would cost at least 200 million bright credits at minimum to fabricate a copy.

This left out all the overhead costs such as the price of making use of the clandestine facilities that allowed him to fabricate his mech in secret. It also left out the license costs that would have added billions of bright credits to the total bill!

Trying to stay as frugal as possible was going to be very hard to Ves as he tried to meet his goals. Everything would be so much easier if Ves invested ten billion bright credits into acquiring the best materials and produce resilient but adaptable smart metal armor plating.

He shook his head. "It's too extravagant!"

Inwardly, he left the option to splurge his money as a backup option. If he failed to design his intended mech with all of the limitations he imposed on the project, he had no qualms in spending extra to forcibly overcome an intractable problem.

His pride and his wallet wouldn't be happy, though.

"I'm still spending more money than I make at the moment." He muttered.

Though he still possessed a healthy reserve of money, he wanted to save the bulk of it for a rainy day. Spending billions of credits to forcibly complete a design project was like cheating in a way.

While Ves did not mind cheating every once in a while, doing it in this instance would deprive him of a valuable learning opportunity.

"This design project is a test of my ingenuity. If my design ability is good enough, I can surely overcome this problem with a reasonable budget!"

He began to draw up a very loose draft of his upcoming design. He activated his terminal and drew the contours of a typical tiger mech.

He then modified and tweaked its shape in order to incorporate smart metal components wherever he could get away with it. Aside from implementing shock absorbers and other minor sections, he also added an oversized tail to the mix.

Even then, Ves only brushed up to ten percent at most, which only represented a third of his target.

"I need more!"

He decided to convert more components and subcomponents into smart metal. While this reduced the overall strength of the frame, the mech became a lot more capable of restoring its functions after suffering an impact.

After a few hours of drafting and sketching, he tentatively managed to turn fifteen percent of his tiger mech into smart metal.

This was already a lot. The substitution of so many strong parts with weaker ones took a toll on his draft design. If he wanted to squeeze in even more smart metal, then he needed to make a more drastic reimagining of his tiger mech design.

"This is not enough! I need at least double!"

Trying to increase the proportion of smart metal in his draft design without resorting to replacing the armor plating was immensely difficult.

He decided to take a break and set his design project aside. Perhaps by allowing his thoughts to precipitate, he might come up with a better way.

"I still have plenty of time before I have to complete my design."

He wanted to be ready to fabricate his mech by the time he reached the Sentinel Kingdom, which was still a few months away. He still had to go through the Chuko Republic first!

Tomorrow, his fleet would be crossing into Chuko space and enter the outskirts of Redwell Province.

This was a risky region of space. A lot of pirate bands prowled the peripheral star systems due to their distance from major star systems. Though the Redwell Province's military deployed frequent patrols to the border, their forces had already been stretched beyond their limits. They simply couldn't cover enough territory to provide adequate protection over their entire stretch of border systems.

Fortunately, the Barracuda and her escorts firmly stuck to the main trading lanes. Even if trade had largely dried up, the security around the channels shouldn't have deteriorated too much. The Chuko Republic and the Redwell province couldn't afford to discourage any more traders shipping essential supplies and goods!

Ves decided to call Commander Cinnabar on the Ion Tracker to hear his advice.

As the call came through, the red haired man's projection appeared in front of the desk.

"Boss, what do you want?"

"Have you visited the Chuko Republic before?"

"Eh, I have. That was a long time ago, though. Chuko was in a much better state back then. People didn't believe that the state would fall at that time."

"Can you tell me anything useful about Chuko that you haven't already included in the reports?"

Commander Cinnabar scratched his scraggly red beard. "Maybe. I'm not sure whether I'm still right."

"Just tell me what you think is useful about Chuko or the Redwell."

"Well, my first piece of advice is that you should get in touch with the underground faction. If you aren't squeamish about mingling with shady organizations, then you can find a lot of useful goods at bottom prices."

Ves raised his eyebrow. This sounded interesting! "Oh? Why is that so?"

"Everyone still needs to make money. The extraction industry has been in constant decline due to the frequent conflicts, but they haven't stopped mining exotics. The problems the Chukans face is that it's becoming very difficult to export them to other states. Many trade convoys carrying significant amounts of valuable resources never reached their destination."

"So there's a glut of goods piling up in the state?"

"Yeah." The Kinner mercenary commander confirmed. "The central and provincial governments regularly dispatch their highly-guarded trade convoys to pick up the accumulating reserves of goods, but the interval between these visits can stretch up to weeks or months. That's a lot of goods piling up in warehouses, you know."

"So the people who are close to those warehouses surreptitiously skim off the top and sell them at the black market?"

"Pretty much. Even the gangs have to make ends meet."

Instances like this reflected the malaise affecting the Chuko Republic. With hardly any private trading vessels diverting to the deteriorating state, it was no surprise that they resorted to these means.

Chapter 1343 Damn Backdoors

"I'll keep your earlier advice in mind." Ves smiled. "Do you have any other suggestions?"

"You might want to hire a local mercenary corps."

"Oh? Do you lack the confidence to guard me, commander?"

He hired the Kinner mercenary corps with the confidence that they could cover most of his security needs. If Commander Cinnabar thought he couldn't do it, then what was the point of hiring them in the first place?

"I'm still sure that my Battle Criers take care of most threats coming your way, sir." Cinnabar quickly added. "It's just that having a local guide will help us avoid any trouble spots and introduce us to the right people."

"Why not hire an actual guide like Kelandra back at Bloodstone?"

Commander Cinnabar shook his head. "A civilian guide will help you navigate regular society better, but they're not much use when you want to navigate the murkier side of the local region."

"I already intend to visit a local mech designer who might help me on this front."

"That will help, but they won't be able to smooth over everything, particularly if you get into a conflict with the more unscrupulous groups. There are smaller mercenary corps for hire in the Chuko Republic who have made it their business to keep visitors like you out of trouble. They're a lot pricier than normal, but you're effectively paying tribute in exchange for a promise of safety."

"Are those mercenary corps in bed with the groups that might threaten us?" Ves asked suspiciously.

The commander grinned. "Very likely. That doesn't mean that the local mercenary corps are untrustworthy. Crisis situation or not, the Mercenary Association is still respected there, I think. If mercenaries become as trustworthy as pirates, then that's the moment when the Chuko Republic has really fallen."

That was a bold claim to make, but it made sense. The role of mercenaries declined during peacetime. Lack of conflict was bad business in their eyes.

When a moderate amount of conflict occurred, the mercenary industry enjoyed a boom time. There was plenty of work for them available and customers paid handsomely in order to secure their properties and trade convoys.

The situation at the Chuko Republic had gone beyond that. The awful security situation, the lack of trade and the deterioration of institutions meant that many companies had shuttered or were already teetering on the edge of solvency.

Many of these struggling companies hardly had the money to spare on hiring mercenaries.

The mercenary corps themselves found it increasingly more difficult to purchase fuel, supplies, mechs, ships and other goods. Without an adequate infrastructure, the prices for these goods and services increased to a level where many mercenary corps found it untenable to continue to operate in the Chuko Republic.

Many of them had packed up their bags and exited the Chuko Republic. Those that remained behind for various reasons barely made ends meet.

It did not surprise Ves to hear that these leftovers resorted to crooked means to supplement their income.

In the end, Ves decided to accept Commander Cinnabar's suggestion. Bribing the local power players in order to avoid any opportunistic attacks was a necessary price to pay for mingling in a troubled state.

"Please explore some options for me and send the list to me." Ves instructed. "I'm sure you know the local landscape a bit better than I. Try and sound them out as well to see if they can offer something special."

"Will do, boss. I made some old friends a long time ago. I'll get in touch with them again and see if they can give us a hand."

The commander did not have much to say beyond that. His knowledge of the Chuko Republic was rusty and out of date, which meant that most of his experiences were no longer relevant.

After Ves ended the call, he decided to contact someone else while he was at it. He called up Tristan Wesseling on a whim.

The call did not come through. After several minutes of ringing, Ves finally gave up with a disappointed sigh. "He's probably busy or isolated."

Just like Ves, not every mech designer appreciated being interrupted by comm calls while they were in a crucial phase of their design projects.

Who else could he talk to outside of business matters?

One name stood out. Gloriana would definitely answer his comm call. Yet the thought of talking to her made him nervous. There was only so much Gloriana he could handle at a time.

Ves had a hunch she might be watching him through the ship's monitoring system right now.

He turned his head to a random direction. "Gloriana, if you're watching me right now, at least give me the illusion of privacy. Also, don't bother trying to sneak a peek at me when I'm in the bathroom. I've already taken precautions."

No projection of a certain woman popped up after he had spoken, but he was sure she would get the message.

"Goddamn backdoors."

If he wanted to enjoy more thorough privacy, then he either needed to carry an active jammer all day or he should obtain a starship without any holes in its security.

He let out a rueful chuckle. "Unless I build a ship from the ground up, I can forget about obtaining a truly secure ship."

The best he could do in a reasonable amount of time was to start a shipbuilding company. He'd also have to hire some young shipwrights fresh out of university before other organizations got their hooks into them. Then he'd have to wait for years as they built up the necessary skills to progress from simple cargo haulers to being able to design and build more advanced spacecraft.

"That's way too much trouble." Ves shook his head.

Mech designers that diverted into shipbuilding were only distracting themselves from their actual work. People like Professor Velten of the Flagrant Vandals already warned him not to take other vocations lightly.

Right now, Ves ought to focus fully on reaching Senior as fast as possible. Not only would he have more say in matters, but he could also stay a step ahead of Gloriana.

"Who can I call?"

He wanted to try and call Carlos, but he figured that might just inflame his animosity towards him further.

After a bit of thought, he decided to call Professor Ventag. He had some questions about the way forward for a Journeyman and could use some advice from a friendly Senior Mech Designer.

Though Ves met numerous Seniors, he could only really approach two of them. Between Professor Ventag who he collaborated with and the insane Skull Architect, he definitely preferred to take advice from the former!

The call took some time to get through. He first had to get through a secretary before the Senior himself appeared in front of him as a projection.

The man looked a bit more tired and stressed than usual. Ves always found the professor to be a model of composure.

"Ves. It's been some time since we've talked." The professor sat down on a chair on his own end. "The Aurora Titan is still selling like hotcakes, though so far it has rarely seen battle."

"Only the wealthy outfits and security companies have bought the copies. It's no surprise that no one wants to test their mettle." Ves replied.

"Indeed. Anyway, I doubt you wanted to talk about the Aurora Titan. It's a great design and an enduring seller but not the kind of product that will achieve much market penetration."

"I wanted to ask for some advice, actually." He paused for a bit. "Recently, I've become a bit troubled by the.. changes in mentality."

The professor smiled. "I'm sure you've observed that mech designers like us can come in all shapes and sizes. Some are.. not as composed as normal people. This is a known phenomenon in the mech community. The MTA has poured a lot of investigation into this subject and the general consensus is that it's related to one of the secrets that you no doubt heard when you visited their sector headquarters."

Ves nodded. The professor referred to psionic power.

"I'm kind of worried about keeping my personality under control."

"This is a concern that every developing mech designer faces. My best advice is not to worry about it too much."

"Oh?"

"It's simple. Mech design is difficult the higher up you go. People like you and me have displayed the drive that has allowed us to step past the limitations halting many ordinary mech designers from progressing any further. The

moment mech designers become cautious and timid, they'll become a lot less likely to make any further progress."

"So mech designers ought to be more bold if they want to increase their chances of breaking through."

The professor shook his head. "It's not as straightforward as that. It's not the case that bold mech designers are always successful or that cautious mech designers are universal failures. In truth, there are many factors in play that affect a mech designer's probability of breaking through, and it's impossible to determine all of them and calculate the best behavior that you can adopt in order to maximize your chances."

"Mech designers are humans, and humans are complicated." Ves summed up.

"Exactly. This is exactly why mech designers exist. We utilize our human ingenuity to develop creative new solutions to service the demand for better mechs."

"So ultimately mech designers should just be themselves?"

"Within reason. The MTA's recommendation is to stick to their guidelines as much as possible, and I think they have a lot of merit. Controlled passion is the key phrase here."

The professor didn't tell Ves what he already knew. Mech designers ought to be themselves while balancing their passion and control. Although this did not ensure the best success, it was the best consensus position to take.

Perhaps the only reason why the MTA did not push for full control was because many mech designers wouldn't be able to restrain themselves anyway.

In addition, the MTA was still racing against time to improve the overall standard of mech design before warships made their inevitable reappearance. If a couple of nutcases like the Skull Architect occasionally popped up, then that was an acceptable price to pay!

"What do you think, professor?" Ves pressed. "Is there anything else you can tell me besides parroting the MTA line?"

Professor Ventag chuckled. "If you ask me, your concerns on this matter are wildly overblown. From my interactions with you, you're a bright and thoughtful mech designer. While your ambitions are great, they've mostly been a boon to you. As long as you are passionate in your craft, I'm sure you will grow farther. You're a lot more brilliant than I was at your age."

"Thanks for the compliment." Ves awkwardly smiled.

The professor evidently didn't know him very well. Their interactions had always been polite and Ves barely ever showed a different facet of himself to the esteemed Senior.

The two chatted about other subjects as Ves asked some minor questions. The professor's replies didn't tell him anything exciting, but his advice was very practical.

"How will the Bright Republic react if I continue my relationship with Gloriana?" Ves suddenly asked.

"You're not the first Brighter who has entered into a relationship with a prominent second-class citizen." The professor easily replied. "Miss Wodin is an exceptional woman. While the Bright Republic as a whole maintains various ties with the Friday Coalition, the state isn't concerned that you will do anything untoward unless you make explicit moves to influence government policy."

"Will the state really remain uninvolved?"

The professor crossed his arms. "Do you think you're the first Brighter who snagged a powerful lover? There are rules for this. The Hexadric Hegemony won't allow Gloriana to unduly exert pressure on the Bright Republic through her relations with you. The same applies to Fridaymen as well. The only reason for the Bright Republic to pay more attention to your relationship is if hostilities between the two second-rate states begin to flare."

"Will I be in trouble if that happens?" He frowned.

"It'll be fine. If the big boys ever come to blows, the Bright Republic and the other inconsequential states will merely be relegated to the sides. When the dust finally settles, everyone who aligned themselves with the losing state will probably become the friends of the winning state in short order."

Professor Ventag's words expressed the general helplessness the Bright Republic faced. Ves was glad of that, since it didn't sound as if Ves would incur any serious repercussions if he continued to associate himself with the Hexers.

Chapter 1344 Vindar

After his talk with Professor Ventag, Ves realized that he no longer paid much attention to the Bright Republic. His deliberate strategy to enter foreign markets as well as his personal travels abroad made him less inclined to see his home state as an important consideration.

"It's home, but it's so small." He whispered.

He always imagined that his business was destined to outgrow the Bright Republic. With the advantages he possessed, Ves would have to be a dunce if his business activities failed to outpace the companies owned by other peers.

Nonetheless, the pace of his outward expansion exceeded his earlier projections. His perspective had also changed. Seeing the majesty of

Centerpoint firsthand opened up his eyes to the diversity and prosperity not too far from his home state.

It became harder and harder for him to direct an adequate amount of attention to the Bright Republic.

"Is it too small for a mech designer like me?"

He shook his head. He shouldn't get too conceited. The Bright Republic was still the foundation of his mech business. It posed the least barriers to him and he could always count on it to have his back whenever he met with difficulties in his business ventures.

The Bright Republic extracted a juicy amount of tax from the LMC, after all. Flashlight also harbored a lot of ambitions to reach foreign states through a company they held shares in. His home state had taken plenty of preemptive measures to keep the LMC and Ves firmly in their claws.

"Yet... if I really want to, I can probably break out of their cage." He realized.

With a rich and powerful girlfriend like Gloriana, he could probably ask her to apply some pressure to extract some concessions from the Bright Republic.

Yet what would be the point? Not only would he uproot himself from the place of his birth, his defection would also affect the standing of his fellow Larkinsons.

"The Larkinson Family is rooted in the Bright Republic. I can't imagine they are willing to abandon centuries of loyal service and development." He muttered.

In the future, Ves would have to make an important decision. Two decisions in fact.

First, should he pull off a 'Patricia' and move the center of his business and design activities to a better place?

Second, should he transition from designing third-class mechs to second-class mechs?

Ves had resolved to stick to the status quo on both questions fairly recently. Yet with the sudden events that overtook him recently, he began to doubt the wisdom of his earlier decisions.

The two questions were deeply intertwined. Not only did they affect his future trajectory to an enormous degree, the choices he made also influenced the development of his design work.

The question whether he should transition to designing second-class mechs became very thorny for him recently.

One of the biggest shortcomings between his relationship with Gloriana was that she was a second-class mech designer. While she could probably design a third-class mech in an emergency, she would no doubt hate the many cost, resource and tech limitations these mechs imposed.

As for Ves, while he was confident he could get the hang of designing second-class mechs in time, he would have to familiarize himself with their characteristic design principles over a lengthy period of time before he could really hit his stride.

Ves shook his head. Though the other side looked really attractive, he had just come off a conversation with Professor Ventag who emphasized that he should stay true to himself.

"I can't discount his advice."

Though the professor's advice was really boring and perfunctory, his words nonetheless reflected a fundamental truth to every mech designer.

Their work reflected their heart.

For now, uprooting his foundation in order to make a permanent move out of his home was way too jarring. It wouldn't do his future development any good if he constantly chased after shinier toys.

"Well, that's for later. The Chuko Republic awaits!"

The Barracuda and the accompanying Battle Crier vessels quietly entered Chukan space after many weeks of travel. Many other vessels had already made a detour as they came close to the infamously troubled state. Only a handful of vessels still continued onwards despite the perils.

Fortunately, his fleet encountered no hindrance until they arrived at the Vindar System of the Redwell Province.

The Vindar System used to be one of the Chuko Republic's many moderately industrialized star systems. Vindar's mech industry used to be small but burgeoning. Now, it was teetering on the edge of irrelevance as domestic mech designers dealt with many problems arising from failing institutions, worsening security situation and dysfunctional logistics.

The latter problem was really acute. With trade and shipping drying up, the cost of materials ballooned. The supply of materials only sold outside the Chuko Republic became so limited that some of their prices increased by an order of magnitude!

A lot of mechs became too expensive to produce because some of their components cost ten times as much to make! This forced many mech designers out of business while compelling the remainder to design more sober mechs that made do without critical materials that they took for granted.

The Chuko Republic's mech industry entered into such dire straits that foreign mech sales heavily overtook domestic sales.

"The Chukans lost confidence in their domestic mech designers." Ves observed.

This made a lot of mech designers desperate to leave for better pastures. Unfortunately, the central and provincial governments didn't let them. After the initial waves of brain drain occurred, the government quickly clamped down on emigration.

The moment a state lost its brightest mind was the moment where their futures were cut off!

Right now, his visit to the Chuko Republic was very conspicuous for that reason. He was sure he'd be eyed very closely by the government authorities. The moment he made any moves to poach their local mech designers or researchers, he'd probably arouse their ire.

Even Ves did not dare to overstep his boundaries lightly in Vindar.

Once the fleet successfully transitioned into the Vindar System, Ves observed the local plot and saw nothing of note. Ship traffic was fairly anemic even for industrial star systems in a slump.

"Captain, please set course for Vindar VII."

"Will do, sir."

The Vindar System possessed two habitable planets. Vindar V proved to be a mildly favorable planet for the cultivation of food and luxury crops. Right now, handled the bulk of the food needs of Vindar VII and a handful of surrounding star systems.

Vindar VII served as the industrial, administrative and commercial heart of the star system. It used to be a bustling regional center in this corner of the Redwell Province, but times had changed. With lots of businesses shuttering their doors, the planet suffered from high unemployment.

Putting all of those people out of work with hardly any alternative except for basic handouts to keep them fed led to a lot of discontent. In fact, Vindar VII

experienced frequent spats of fighting due to the growing ranks of locals joining the banners of the Whitewellers and Bloodwellers.

Despite these unfavorable conditions, Ves nonetheless pressed through with his visit. This was because Vindar VII housed a very interesting mech designer.

After a quiet journey where the Barracuda and the Battle Crier ships were subjected to strict inspections from the paltry, bribe-hungry garrison, they successfully reached orbit.

Due to the strict measures the Redwell Province implemented to prevent smuggling or trafficking, all traffic from orbit to surface and vica versa had to be taken care of by government or military-owned ships.

As everyone was ready to depart to the surface, Ves allowed Crindon to remain behind in order to continue the overhaul of the Barracuda.

Ves, Nitaa, Gavin, Commander Cinnabar and Lucky proceeded to board a worn-out shuttle operated by the planetary government.

The landbound mechs of the Battle Criers would join them later. Due to the various restrictions Vindar VII imposed, Ves was only allowed to bring just six mechs down to the surface for his own protection.

"You should be glad you're allowed to bring some mechs down to the surface at all." Commander Cinnabar helplessly shrugged. "Despite all the violence raging in the back streets, the planetary government doesn't want to inflame the situation any further."

"I suppose it doesn't matter as soon as we meet with the mercenaries you've contacted, right?"

"Yup. The limitations won't apply retroactively, so if we sign a contract with a local mercenary corps, we can effectively exceed the cap on mechs."

This was one of the many ways in which the government attempted to encourage local spending.

The shuttle landed at a heavily-guarded spaceport in Wilxyr, the jewel of Vindar VII.

"Well, it used to be shinier here last time I visited." Commander Cinnabar belatedly noted.

The city sure did look like it enjoyed better days. While the cityscape didn't feature too much grime or ruined structures, Ves noted that many of them appeared to be empty or out of business.

The general mood among the people in the streets didn't seem very encouraging either. It was as if the local citizens experienced so many setbacks that they became numb to their deteriorating circumstances.

"We should wait for the mech escorts to arrive." Fe Nitaa advised. This time, she opted to wear a suit of medium combat armor instead of her more low-profile bodyguard outfit. "The risks of encountering trouble after stepping out of this spaceport is too significant. If you look outside, there aren't enough peacekeepers on the streets to deter attacks."

Everyone else except Ves nodded in agreement. Even Lucky agreed!

"Meow!"

Ves bowed to their collective wisdom. "Okay. I guess we can wait until the customs office releases our escort mechs."

Unfortunately, that took another round of bribes to facilitate. If they didn't, the officials working there might decide to hold the mechs back for a few days!

"You should keep your bank account ready." Commander Cinnabar warned. "I've visited a handful of places like this where every bureaucrat stops giving a damn to their superiors."

The prevalence of bribes was a good way to gauge how well the local society functioned. Having already been forced to bribe the inspectors, the shuttle and transport crews as well as the spaceport customs office, their opinion of the Vindar System had dropped to rock bottom!

Ves already knew what he was getting into. "Vindar is far from a paradise, but it's not an outright disaster zone."

"I'm not so sure, boss." Gavin remarked. "I always thought it was a bad idea to visit the Chuko Republic. What I've seen so far suggests the situation is much worse than I thought."

The executive assistant really didn't want to come down to the surface.

"Relax, Benny. Once we contact the local mercenary corps, we'll probably be in the clear."

Once the Battle Crier mechs were finally let go, the group began to move to the outskirts of Wilxyr.

Ves studied the landbound mechs of the Battle Criers that surrounded their shuttle. He had already studied them before. They were generally budget models with quite a few years of service already behind them. While they were not as impressive as the mechs of the Avatars of Myth, they were all dependable and rugged, which was a key trait to any mercenary corps who wanted to make ends meet.

"As long as you stick with me, your Battle Criers will get to play with better mechs." Ves promised to Commander Cinnabar.

"We'll see." The Kinner replied noncommittedly.

They soon arrived at the grounds of a small and shabby-looking base. While the sight did not inspire a lot of confidence in Ves, Commander Cinnabar

swore that the mercenaries occupying the base was one of the most reliable outfits around.

Whether that was truly the case remained to be seen. In any case, it wasn't as if the alternatives were that much better in the first place. Not after so many years of decline.

Chapter 1345 Old Man Terrence

Ves and his staff entered the base owned by an outfit called the Vindar Dustravens. They were different from many other outfits in that they exclusively fielded aerial mechs.

When times were good, their services were in high demand. Yet when the Chuko Republic's economy continued to tumble downwards, the Dustravens found themselves with very little jobs.

According to Commande Cinnabar, in order for them to keep paying the bills, they began to cooperate with the shadier organizations in Vindar.

Commander Inteo Meivin of the Dustravens greeted the commander of the Battle Criers with a hearty hug.

"Hugin! It's been almost half a decade!"

"Hahaha!" Cinnabar laughed as they let go of each other. "You look older than before! Times sure have changed."

"And not for the better." Commander Meivin commented. "Let's leave the unpleasant topics for later. Mr. Larkinson, welcome to Vindar VII. Although I can't promise your stay will be pleasant, as long as we are around, we'll do our best to make you feel secure."

Ves smiled at Meivin. "I'll take your word for that. What I've seen so far of this planet doesn't exactly inspire a lot of confidence."

"Let's discuss the contract further in my office. I've already prepared the arrangements beforehand."

Once they entered the administrative building of the Dustravens, Ves and Meivin quickly hashed out a limited agreement. The Dustravens would escort and accompany Ves during his entire stay in the Redwell Province.

"Are you confident you'll be able to protect us outside of the Vindar System?" Ves curiously questioned.

"Our mechs might not look like much, but we have many ties to many different organizations." Commander Meivin confidently replied. "We Redwellers have to stick together, you see. If every Redweller has to fend for themselves, then our province will quickly cease to be a part of the Chuko Republic."

Ves took that to mean that Commander Meivin was inclined towards the Bloodweller side.

"Alright. Commander Cinnabar is confident in your capabilities, so I'll take your word for it. I better hope your ties are as extensive as you've boasted."

It wasn't as if Ves could determine the truth. This kind of information wasn't mentioned in any public records. Even if Ves approached another mercenary corps, he would just face the same problem anyway. He might as well give the Dustravens a chance.

Ves left the subsequent details to Gavin. As the contract was being finalized, Ves started to pump Commander Meivin for information.

"How is the overall level of security on Vindar VII?"

"It's been better, Mr. Larkinson. Since Vindar is not a border system, we aren't plagued by frequent fighting. While violent incidents do occur from time to time, they're mostly scuffles at the infantry level."

"Oh? What about mech-on-mech violence?"

"That happens surprisingly little here. Outfits like us are already struggling to make ends meet with our existing roster of mechs. Replacing them when they get wrecked can get extremely expensive, so everyone with mechs will have to think twice before they risk them in battle."

That was a welcome piece of news for Ves. He did not fear any threats on the infantry level. It was only mechs that posed a significant threat to him. Shield generator or not, it wouldn't protect him for long if a mech kept stomping its feet into his body!

"What do you know about Terrence Reedan?" Ves asked.

"Old Man Terrence? He's the only remaining Journeyman Mech Designer in Vindar. He's getting on in his years. As far as I know, his business is all but dead and he's done nothing against it. Everyone knows the old man has given up on his life. He has no wife and no kids and his standing in the mech industry isn't very high."

According to the information that Ves had found, Terrence Reedan had turned out to be a mediocre Journeyman. He advanced rather late in his life and barely improved afterwards.

This signified that Old Man Terrence hadn't made any significant progress towards Senior. Considering the older man's Class VIII design philosophy, Ves wasn't surprised.

According to the limited record that Ves managed to access from the MTA's database, Terrence Reedan's specialty dealt with neural interfaces. The exact details escaped him as research into neural interfaces was a very sensitive subject matter in the mech community.

Ves spotted an opportunity ever since he came across Terrence Reedan's situation. This man was a potential goldmine of knowledge about neural interface technology.

Just like Iris Jupiter and the Jupiter Family of the Vesia Kingdom, Terrence Reedan was one of the few mech designers who received permission from the MTA to research neural interfaces!

From his own haphazard experiments with neural interfaces, Ves knew first-hand how thorny it was to connect the mind of a human to a machine.

Yet Ves couldn't stop his fascination for this field. The man-machine connection played a central role to his design philosophy, so the limited amount of knowledge he accumulated from various sources would eventually hamper him from developing better mechs.

"Has Terrence received any visitors over the years?"

"Not as far as I know. Reedan Mech Industries has already downscaled its production a long time ago, so hardly any business had come his way. I've heard that other mech designers haven't bothered to maintain their relationships with him either."

Ves understood why. The man was already old and had no hopes of advancing to Senior and thereby earn enough money for the first round of life-prolonging treatment.

In addition, domestic mech designers didn't have much interest in making use of customized neural interfaces during this period of decline. It was much safer and cheaper to incorporate the standard neural interface models that the MTA provided to every mech designer for free.

Only an oddball like Ves would still think to approach a mech designer who specialized in this controversial and problematic field.

As Ves and Commander Meivin continued to chat, the contract finally took shape. After both of them signed it, the Dustravens were officially under the employ of Ves for a maximum of two months or until Ves departed from the Redwell Province.

They shook hands.

"You've made the right choice, Mr. Larkinson."

"I hope so." Ves smiled back. "Please coordinate your deployments with Commander Cinnabar. He is already responsible for every mech-related matter."

"Will do."

The addition of the Vindar Dustravens to his mech protection detail plugged an important gap that the Battle Criers hadn't been able to address.

The aerial mechs of the Dustravens were fast and light. From what Ves heard, the Dustravens used to field medium aerial mechs in the past, but they gradually ditched them as their fuel or energy consumption became too burdensome to a declining mercenary corps.

The light aerial mechs that remained were mostly of the harasser type. They were designed to pelt distant enemies from afar while maintaining their distance.

Overall, the Dustraven mechs fared poorly in melee combat, so any aerial light skirmisher that sneaked up on them could quickly dice them apart.

Nonetheless, the chances of that happening was low since the Dustraven mechs were already fast to begin with. They wouldn't allow an enemy mech to approach without paying a hefty price.

Perhaps the only other shortcoming of the Dustraven mechs was that their firepower was very light, but Ves already took that into account. He prized them more for their deterrence against assassins and other troublemakers on foot.

As the two mercenary commanders hashed out their arrangements, Ves and his entourage quickly entered their shuttle and slowly flew towards the headquarters of Reedan Mech Industries.

For such a grand name, the company looked anything but industrious. As Ves arrived at the empty parking zone of the headquarters, Ves studied the building with a critical eye.

"Nine out of ten offices are empty."

"I'm surprised that one and ten are still present." Gavin noted. "Is there any reason to clock into work at all? It's been years since Reedan Mech Industries sold a mech!"

"Maybe Terrence Reedan kept them on the payroll so that they wouldn't starve on the streets."

The structure itself had seen some better days as well. Rusty cleaning bots erased the graffiti splattered over its walls. The guard posts were empty. The defensive turrets and other installations had all been ripped away as the security company that used to guard it had moved away.

The group entered the lobby, where they were met with a single feeble-looking assistant.

"Ah, Mr. Larkinson. You are right on time. Terrence Reedan is waiting for you upstairs." The man who looked to be almost as old as Reedan said.

The assistant was probably Reedan's version of Gavin.

They stepped into an elevator that brought them straight to the top. Once there, they entered into an expansive office that should have displayed the power and prestige of a Journeyman Mech Designer.

Right now, most of the furniture and ornaments that used to decorate the office was absent. This gave Ves and the other visitors a very desolate impression of the room and its principal occupant.

"Mr. Larkinson." A husky voice whispered. A speech enhancer amplified the volume of the old man's voice. "Please step closer. As for your guests, my assistant will lead them elsewhere. You won't need them here."

"Sir." Nitaa stepped forward, but Ves raised his hand.

"Some matters between mech designers are best discussed amongst ourselves, Nitaa."

She eventually acquiesced after some convincing. Only Ves, Lucky and Old Man Terrence remained in the office after the others left.

Ves kept Lucky in his arms without asking permission, figuring that Old Man Terrence likely wouldn't mind.

The other mech designer indeed made no comment about the presence of his pet.

Once Ves approached the man's desk and took the only available seat, they began their discussion.

"So. A new Journeyman wishes to exchange with me?" The shaky old man chuckled. Among all the senile people Ves had met, only Venerable O'Callahan of the Flagrant Vandals looked closer to death! "I must profess my lack of understanding why a vigorous young mech designer like you are interested in my tales. There are many other mech designers you can hear from instead."

"That is true." Ves replied while stroking Lucky's back. His confident posture gave him the impression that he was the one in charge in the office! "I'm not interested in boring tales, though. Can you guess why I've come?"

The old man hackingly coughed. "I can think of no other reason than to obtain information that mech designers like you aren't supposed to obtain. That is dangerous, young man."

Ves innocently spread his hands. "I'm not interested in obtaining classified knowledge on neural interfaces from you. Instead, I'd like you to pass on your general insights related to this field."

"There is much that I can't say."

"I'm not asking for technical details or secret formulas, Mr. Reedan. I just want a better impression on the effect a neural interface has on both ends."

Ves knew his limits and he knew it wouldn't be wise to ask for more. Just learning some of the accumulated insights of a mech designer who had been in the business for over seventy years was valuable enough.

The restraint shown by Ves impressed the old man somewhat. Old Man Terrence fell into a thoughtful mood.

"Since I am not long for this galaxy, I might as well impart a portion of my insights to a fellow practitioner of the craft. You're not the first mech designer who asked me about neural interfaces, but you're the only one who approached in these declining times."

Well, that was easy. Ves thought he had to do a lot more convincing to get the old man to open his mouth.

"Thank you, Mr. Reedan. I'll do my best to make good use of your knowledge. A part of your work will always live on in my mech designs."

"You don't have to flatter me, kid. My legacy is worthless." The old man bluntly stated. "Well, enough about that. Let's get started with this exchange, shall we?"

Chapter 1346 Dirty Knowledge

Ves and Old Man Terrence made themselves comfortable in their seats.

While Terrence leaned over his desk, Ves continued to pet Lucky in a leisurely manner.

The owner of the office pressed a button on his desk which caused a signal jammer to engage. Once the jamming field came into force, the old man began to speak."

"Let me start with something basic. Do you know why neural interfaces never became popular until the advent of mechs?"

This was an easy question to Ves. "That's because the early incarnations of neural interfaces were very crude. Because they are so intricately tied to the human minds that connect to them, permanent brain damage occurred very frequently. This depressed any further research into these devices."

"Right. While neural interfacing technology has made substantial leaps since then because of their widespread use in mechs up to today, the same problems that plagued the early models still exist to this day."

Ves frowned at that. "Are you suggesting that modern neural interfaces are dangerous?"

"Don't believe in the MTA!" The man released a feeble cackle. "They have done their best to paint their 'standard' neural interface models as the safest and least problematic devices in use today. That much is true, I admit, but the bar they set is not as high as you think. Each time a mech pilot interfaces with a mech, there is a non-zero chance that they will suffer adverse effects, which may or may not lead to permanent damage to the mech pilot's brain structure."

This was a very alarming revelation! Ves had no idea that something like this took place behind everyone's backs!

"Then.. if this problem exists, why isn't there a big stink about it? Shouldn't the MTA be more responsible?"

Old Man Terrence looked at Ves like he was an idiot. "And scare everyone away from piloting mechs? Do you really think the MTA is so responsible as to do that?"

Right.

"I see." Ves subsided. "If the problem is as severe as you suggest, then what is being done to protect mech pilots against the mechs they pilot?"

"I never said the problem was severe." Terrence knocked his fist against the surface of his desk. "The issue is more complex than that. What actually takes place is that the brains of mech pilots begin to adjust to the enduring neural interfacing sessions they experience. This is a known phenomenon. What the MTA and neural interface specialists like I don't mention is that sometimes the adjustments miss the mark."

"So.. it's a side effect of the normal long-term adjustment process?"

"You can describe it as such. These 'side effects' aren't necessarily a big deal either. Human brains are very fragile but also very resilient in a way. Veteran mech pilots no doubt accumulated a collection of miniscule scars or bumps in their brain structure. In most cases, that hasn't led to a deterioration in their cognitive functions. The changes happen so gradually that their brains can easily implement adaptations to retain most of their functionality."

"Then why mention this issue if it's just a side effect?"

"Because there are several instances where the 'side effects' can become serious." Terrence replied seriously. "The most prevalent instance is when a mech incurs heavily damage. Neural interfaces are some of the most protected components of the cockpit of a mech, but if by some chance they

are damaged, then the man-machine connection can quickly turn from something benign into something dangerous."

"My grandfather used to be an expert pilot. He was forced to retire because of brain damage."

"Exactly! Now, if you have spent some time with your grandfather, did you notice that he is incapable of functioning normally?"

Compared to all of the crazy people Ves had met, his grandfather Benjamin was a beacon of normality!

"No."

"Then you see why the MTA doesn't feel the need to disclose this uncomfortable truth to the galaxy." Terrence sighed. "Interfacing changes brains. This is the fundamental reality the mech community has to work with. Categorizing the changes in brain structure is a controversial topic in itself. What is considered a benign adjustment and what is considered a malignant development? Sometimes, the changes can be both."

"How can they be both?"

"By providing a benefit that comes at a cost! Let me tell you something. If mech pilots are able to interface five percent more effectively in exchange for giving up five years of their cognitive lifespan, will they be willing to make this trade?"

That was a very difficult question! Ves paused his petting of Lucky, which caused the cat to let out a disgruntled meow.

"I think... some mech pilots harbor a lot of ambitions. Those who want to advance to expert pilot or those who want to do their utmost to defend their state will gladly pay this price. But not every mech pilot will want to make this trade. Those who see mech piloting as an easy job to earn a lot of money will

just want to do their time before they retire with a comfortable amount of savings and a generous pension."

The Chukan mech designer smirked. "What if I tell you that mech pilots don't get to make that choice? What if the MTA has already decided on their behalf?"

"You mean.. The standard neural interface models.."

"As I said, the MTA may paint them as safe, but the truth is completely different! Even I can design a neural interface that is half as likely to result in adverse changes to a mech pilot's brains! Yet will anyone pilot a mech with my neural interface? No! Because its performance parameters are inferior compared to the more dangerous models!"

This was a lot to take in for Ves!

"So if I'm understanding it correctly, the MTA hasn't chosen the safest option because they want to squeeze more performance out of mech pilots?"

"Right, Mr. Larkinson. To their credit, they picked a reasonably safe threshold. They could have gone for much worse but they don't want to ruin too many mech pilots."

"Why exactly are the more dangerous neural interfaces more rewarding?"

"Because they allow for greater connections." The old man replied. "You can see it as a consideration of risk. If the connection is deeper, the mech pilot is more immersed with the mech. The higher degree of immersion means that their exposure is subsequently greater. If some sort of catastrophic incident occurs, a mech pilot with a shallow connection will be able to pull out the connections a lot faster and easier than one who is practically submerged in the systems of their own mechs!"

A lot of factors went into determining how deep a mech pilot could connect with their mechs. Some of it depended on the mech design, some of it depended on the neural interface model and configuration and the rest was up to the mech pilot themselves.

Ves knew that mech pilots could draw back or further engage their connection with their own mechs on their own volition.

However, from his Mastery experiences, he knew that mech pilots frequently got caught up in all of the excitement. They instinctively wanted to achieve greater performance, so their connection to their mechs unknowingly deepened, sometimes to a degree that they had never reached before!

"What kind of damage does a deep connection do?" Ves frowned. "I don't quite understand what risks the mech pilots incur. You mentioned something about decreased lifespan, but is that the only negative consequence?"

Old Man Terrence closed his eyes for a moment. "The damage can come in many forms. As you've already surmised, a decreased lifespan is just one of the consequences. This is also one of the hidden reasons why life-prolonging treatment is much more difficult to arrange for mech pilots. The standard treatments are only partially effective on the most critical organs of their bodies, their scarred and altered brains. The more they pilot, the greater the degree of abnormalities that hinder the treatment from taking effect."

This was another huge revelation! Visiting Old Man Terrence had already been worth it as far as Ves was concerned!

"So that is why life-prolonging treatments for mech pilots is so difficult to arrange."

"Do you think the MTA shows so much favoritism to expert pilots because they are fans of them?" Terrence Reedan scoffed. "Do you think one of the Big Two treat them with kid gloves because they are special snowflakes? It's

because their numbers would heavily diminish if they haven't implemented all of these favorable policies! With how difficult it is to tailor life-prolonging treatments to take effect on a heavily-altered brain structure, expert pilots are some of the most unfortunate people in the mech community. They bloom so brilliantly, yet they last so short."

Unlike talented mech designers, who could generally get access to life-prolonging treatments without too much hassle.

In this, the difference between Ves and Old Man Terrence became very stark. Ves had a full life ahead of him. He had more than enough time to innovate and progress his design philosophy.

In fact, Ves believed that the first round of life-prolonging treatment was already redundant for him due to all of the gene optimisation treatments he received beforehand!

As for Old Man Terrence, the man was a storied Journeyman, but despite his lengthy career, he was unable to make the critical breakthrough.

Yet despite his sad situation, he showed no pity towards himself. Instead, he pitied expert pilots!

That was true dedication to mech pilots, Ves realized. Old Man Terrence respected mech pilots to a much greater degree than himself!

"Aside from diminishing the lifespan of pilots and making it harder for them to enjoy life-prolonging treatment, there are other debilitating effects as well."

The old man continued. "When mech pilots begin to deepen their connections to mechs and embody their mechs, they will feel the damage the mech suffers on a deeper level."

"It would be as if their own bodies suffered those wounds?"

"Exactly. While there are medicines and treatments to suppress these side effects, the human body and mind are simply too complex. Solutions designed to be as compatible as possible will never be able to take effect to every mech pilot that suffers from lingering trauma. There is always a proportion of mech pilots that fall through the net."

"I see."

That explained why some of the retired Larkinson mech pilots at the Larkinson Estate didn't appear to be in good shape.

"Aside from the physiological changes, the psyche of the mech pilot is also affected." Terrence shook his head. "This is a very advanced and controversial topic. I'm not allowed to say much about it other than that there are at least two sides of this discussion. One side advocates that changes to a mech pilot's psyche is beneficial while the other side considers it to be contamination."

This caused Ves to sit more upright in his chair. The effect of a mech on a mech pilot's psyche was something that was highly relevant to his own specialization!

"Does this mean that the personality of a mech pilot can shift depending on the type of mech he pilots?"

"It's a difficult topic, Mr. Larkinson. For example, it is known that mechs designed to fulfill a specific purpose such as knight mechs will naturally make mech pilots more inclined to become protective and resilient. Now, think about the cause of this gradual shift in personality. Is it because the mech pilot is simply focused on performing defensive tasks with their mechs all the time? Or is it because the mech has already been designed with defensive inclinations that the machine somehow contaminated them to the mech pilot through a more esoteric process?"

The possibilities stumped Ves. He didn't know which one was true!

"Confused, Mr. Larkinson? Then you're not alone! Every specialist in neural interface technology is confused as well! We don't know the answer! So much research has been done in this topic but the experiments have continued to deliver contradictory evidence! Even the fancy, extravagantly-funded research institutions based in the galactic center don't know any better!"

Each time Old Man Terrence opened his mouth, Ves continued to be astounded by the complexities regarding neural interface technology. He had no idea that so many problems, devious dilemmas and unresolved mysteries surrounded this field!

No wonder the MTA encouraged such a stigma around it! Anyone who delved into this field lightly could unleash a slew of tragedies if they used their knowledge wrongly!

"I never knew that neural interfaces are associated with so many issues." He whispered. "I always learned during my mech design classes that neural interfaces have matured and that they've been made as safe as possible."

Terrence let out an ugly cackle. "That's what the MTA wants everyone to think. Mech designers like us who possess actual expertise have developed a saying amongst ourselves."

"What is this saying?"

"Neural interface technology is the devil's technology!"

Chapter 1347 Devils Technology

"Are you surprised?" Terrence smirked. The old Chukan mech designer revelled in airing the dirty laundry of his specialty field! "Much of the galaxy sees neural interfaces as safe, mature devices because trillions of man-hours have been poured into developing and refining them for widespread usage.

Yet almost no one knows that most of those hours only broadened our perspectives to how serious neural interfaces can fail!"

Throughout this 'exchange' with Old Man Terrence, Ves had fallen into continuous shock. Almost every neural interface specialist should be aware of all of the pitfalls concerning the technology.

Even Iris Jupiter, who introduced him to this field, must have known as well!

What Ves found egregious was that the MTA's deliberate stance to conceal the actual risks of neural interface technology. By propagandizing that neural interfaces were much more sophisticated than the dangerous, pre-Age of Mechs models, an enormous amount of mech designers and mech pilots readily embraced something that must have led to an immense amount of damage!

In Old Man Terrence's case, the damage the tech had caused must have weighed heavily on his conscience! Now that he was nearing the end of his life, Ves found himself in a strange position of hearing the aging Journeyman's confession.

"Neural interface tech is the devil's tech." Terrence reiterated with a shaky fist. "Every mech designer unknowingly incorporates pieces of tech that slowly and gradually degrade the cognitive functions of the users of their products. Does that sound responsible for you? Are we truly serving mech pilots to the best of our abilities, as the MTA often likes to instill in people of our profession?"

"We swore an oath to serve mech pilots!" Ves retorted.

The old man laughed. "Hahaha! That is true, but the devil is in the details! There are multiple interpretations we can choose from. For one mech designer, it may entail minimizing the repercussions of piloting their mechs as much as possible. For another mech designer, it may entail pushing the limits

as far as possible regardless of the consequences! Who decides which interpretation is right?"

Ves could very well imagine that different mech designers would not agree on a common interpretation.

Mech designers such as the Skull Architect would definitely try to push his neural interfaces to an extreme!

Having studied his mech designs extensively, Ves knew very well that the pirate designer cared nothing about mech pilots! Instead, he would seek to exploit every opportunity to raise the performance parameters of his mechs as much as possible!

If the lifespan of the users of his products halved as a consequence, then what did that have to do with the Skull Architect?

Perhaps paradoxically, a mech designer like Gloriana might choose the opposite. As crazy as she seemed, she genuinely seemed to care about the mech pilots of her mechs. As a principle, she would not allow her mechs to be marred by dangerously volatile neural interfaces that posed a clear threat to their mech pilots.

As for Ves? He was still in way too much shock to make up his mind!

He turned his attention back to the conversation. "I take it then that the MTA has already decided on the right interpretation on behalf of every mech designer."

"Correct! One of the main duties the Mech Trade Association has taken up for themselves is to set universal standards for mechs. After an extensive study in the risks associated with neural interfaces, their wise councilors at the top have decided that a certain amount of risk is acceptable!"

"Then wouldn't that make every mech in existence a defective product in a sense?"

The old man laughed again. "Again, there are multiple interpretations! The MTA just chooses to select the most convenient ones to suit their own needs. From my perspective, mechs aren't necessarily defective. Instead, they are all experimental products!"

"That's..."

"Mech designers like you unknowingly sell dangerous mechs to ignorant mech buyers who subsequently assign them to oblivious mech pilots. All of this would have been ethically sound if everyone was aware of the true risks associated with the neural interfaces built into the mechs. Unfortunately, the cold hard reality is that no one except a select group is aware! You can thank the MTA for keeping your conscience clean!"

Until now, Ves silently whispered. Calling it the devil's technology sounded very apt to him now. Every mech designer who made use of the so-called standard neural interface models made available by the MTA unknowingly treated every mech pilot as their experimental test subjects!

He wasn't surprised to hear that the MTA acted in a hypocritical manner. He just wanted to understand their reasoning.

"Mr. Reedan, what does the MTA get out of standardizing higher-specced but unsafer neural interfaces?"

"What do you think the MTA stands for?" Terrence prompted. "The answer is mechs! They worship mechs! They will do anything for mechs! If they have to choose between the wellbeing of people and speeding up the development of mechs, they will choose the latter each time!"

That sounded very extreme even for Ves!

"Unsafer neural interfaces speed up mech development?"

"Of course! While I've mentioned numerous negative consequences of using unsafe neural interfaces, risks are always associated with rewards! Perhaps the single most important factor is that unsafe interfaces are correlated with a higher emergence of expert candidates and expert pilots!"

This was another explosive revelation! If this was true, then Ves could definitely see why the MTA pushed for unsafer standards!

"So it's all about increasing the probability of expert pilots emerging from the masses of oblivious test subjects!"

Old Man Terrence grinned. "I see you understand. The MTA has performed several covert experiments to test whether there is a relationship. They secretly implemented divergent regional standards for neural interfaces across different star sectors. What did they find? Star sectors that made use of safer neural interfaces produced as much as twenty percent less expert pilots compared to star sectors that used highly unsafe neural interfaces!"

Naturally, the MTA conducted this grand experiment without disclosing the risks to the test subjects in question!

"The MTA cares a lot about expert pilots. The more, the better, right?" Ves questioned. He still possessed some doubts. "Why did they decide to set it at the point you mentioned when they could have pushed the limits harder?"

"Other than risk exposure, which would be very bad for the MTA?" Terrence chuckled. "They secretly tried it out in a couple of star sectors. What they found was that while the probability of expert pilots emerging from the ranks definitely increased, their quality deteriorated remarkably. An alarming proportion of them suffered from a host of issues such as suffering from personality disorders, premature aging of their brains or a total loss in

interfacing ability. Over a longer period of time, these star sectors fielded less expert pilots than usual because too many of them died or ended up crippled!"

Ves knew that if not for the total decline in the number expert pilots, the MTA would have definitely pushed for more extreme standards!

"How many victims have these 'experiments' produced?"

"Too much to count." The old man shook his head. "While the experimental measures have helped propel many mech pilots to heights they ordinarily couldn't reach, plenty of talented mech pilots who might have been able to advance to ace pilots died or retired far before their time."

This was the real human cost of engaging in experiments. The MTA could have acted according to their own ethical standards and performed their experiments in a transparent and voluntary basis. Yet they instead opted not to disclose the risks, no doubt so they could keep the true nature of neural interfaces a secret while obtaining the most accurate data.

"Where do we sit now, Mr. Reedan?"

"The MTA performed various experiments over several decades in many different star sectors. Their internal research teams subsequently modeled and simulated these gains in order to determine the sweet spot that produces the maximum amount of expert pilots."

"I see." Ves nodded while resuming his petting of Lucky. The cat was getting rather grumpy about the lack of pampering! "So their current standards for neural interfaces is a mathematically-derived result."

"The neural interface standards still fluctuate from generation to generation and from region to region." Old Man Terrence warned. "The truth is that the sweet spots are different for each state and each star sector. Not only that, but the MTA sometimes wants to influence the amount of expert pilots that emerge from a specific region of space. For example, if they think the Komodo

Star Sector needs more expert pilots, they might tweak the limits of the next generation of neural interfaces made available specifically for this region."

"So the MTA indirectly influences the rate of expert pilots emerging from star sector to star sector?"

"Yes! Don't think the MTA is completely politically neutral. In some cases, their decisions have accelerated the defeat of one star sector over another simply because the former hadn't been able to produce as many expert pilots!"

"What?! Shouldn't mech designers like you know about this?"

"So what? We are all complicit in this matter." The Chukan smiled ruefully.

"While my hands aren't as drenched in blood as that of the MTA, I am still carrying the stains to this day. This is the price that every neural interface specialist has to pay."

A brief silence stretched as Ves processed the latest revelations. Both the MTA and neural interface specialists like Old Man Terrence had become accustomed to running dangerous experiments without disclosing the risks to mech pilots.

To Ves, it seemed like this entire field was rotten to the core! In order to maintain the popularity of neural interface, every neural interface specialist voluntarily turned into devils in order to advance this devil tech!

He suddenly recalled something important about Old Man Terrence.

"According to your record, your specialty is related to the relationship between neural interfaces and genetic aptitude."

"Indeed." The old man nodded. "Like many mech designers, I had a dream. Genetic aptitude plays a central role in how far a mech pilot can go. Those whose aptitudes are graded as D can barely pilot a frontline mech, while those

whose aptitudes are graded as A have a much higher probability of becoming expert pilots. Doesn't this sound unfair to you, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Nothing is fair." Ves repeated one of his central beliefs. "Some people are simply better at something than others. Like many people, I used to dream of becoming a mech pilot when I was a kid. Reality gave me a good whack in the head when I became ten."

"This is true. Not everyone is capable of piloting mechs. Even I did not attempt to tackle this problem. My interest lay more in elevating the effective performance of mech pilots with lower-than-average aptitudes. My ultimate goal was to equalize the playing field between low-potential mech pilots and high potential mech pilots!"

That was a very ambitious dream! Ves felt a lot of admiration for Old Man Terrence for choosing to pursue such a far-reaching goal!

"Have you made a lot of progress in solving this problem?"

"Hahaha! No!" The old man laughed at himself. "I would have been in a much better position if I had! I severely underestimated the role genetic aptitude plays in facilitating the man-machine connection! It was a fool's dream for a lowly mech designer from a third-rate state to think they can solve this problem when even the best minds at the MTA failed to develop a solution!"

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. He wasn't fooled by the old man's self-depreciating act. "You should have at least made some gains over your long years of designing mechs, right?"

"To tell you the truth, I have. What's it to you, though? My design philosophy is fundamentally flawed to begin with. I barely moved forward when I already encountered a dead end! Perhaps a more ingenious mech designer might have been able to climb over it, but it's impossible for the likes of you and me!

The moment I conceded defeat against the strength of genetic aptitude was the moment I ceased progressing my design philosophy any further!"

Mech designers constantly struggled to make the impossible into a reality! Confidence was vital to their progression.

Giving up on pursuing their overarching ambitions was one of the worst outcomes that could happen to a mech designer!

Chapter 1348 Justified Innovation

No matter how much Ves tried to convince Old Man Terrance to share his research gains, the Chukan mech designer adamantly refused.

"The findings I've made are paltry and of limited utility." The man shook his head. "In addition, it's tainted knowledge. In order to further my understanding on how genetic aptitude interacted with neural interfaces, I've engaged in many covert experiments with each mech design I've published. Looking back on my track record, I went too far. Though my customers themselves didn't realize it, I looked closely at how my customers fared. Too many of them fared worse than usual."

This was the blood on the older mech designer's hands. The man raised his wrinkled hands in front of Ves, as if showing off the invisible red stains marring the skin!

"Look at me." Old Man Terrence demanded. "Don't end up like me. I made decisions that I shouldn't have made. I took risks I shouldn't have taken. I ruined the lives of so many mech pilots who didn't deserve a premature end to their careers or lives."

"Why did you do it, then?"

"Because the payoff would have been worth it! Even if I was never destined to make genetic aptitude grades irrelevant, merely reducing the handicaps for low-potential mech pilots would have been enough to make me a celebrated

mech designer! My service to the mech community would have been so great that the MTA would have definitely rewarded me with an extension of my life!"

Unfortunately, Terrence Reedan failed. His progress after he advanced to Journeyman was far too meager compared to the substantial human cost he incurred.

"We neural interface specialists constantly tell ourselves that the end justifies the means. It helps us sleep better at night."

"Do you still agree?"

"Of course, Mr. Larkinson! I dare say that every enterprising mech designer has engaged in some experiment or another to advance their design philosophies! You'd probably be no different if you look back on your own track record!"

That.. was admittedly true. Ves had carelessly incorporated many new innovations in his mech designs without adequately testing whether they were safe and working as intended.

He simply didn't bother with the lengthy trials that scientists ought to hold. Ves had never thought about it before because the mech industry operated on a trend of introducing innovations as fast as possible.

Just like the geneticists that constantly pursued breakneck innovation in genetic modification during the Age of Conquest, mech designers turned out to be no different during the Age of Mechs!

Mechs were so popular and ubiquitous that hardly anyone paid attention to the risks and dangers associated with their development and use!

Did this mean that Ves would henceforth slow down and hold extensive trials for each changes he made?

Probably not.

He didn't want to slow down. He was confident in his mech design ability. He also did not regard his design philosophy as something that came with unduly great risks. Perhaps he would be more concerned if he specialized in neural interfaces, but his specialty was only tangentially related to the devil's technology.

At most, his specialty was more of a half-devil than a pure devil.

"In the end, it's all about the results." Ves sighed. "Mech designers who fail to achieve any significant results will have to live with the guilt of their crimes. Those who succeed are absolved by the valuable gains they've passed on to the mech community."

The ends only justified the means for mech designers if they had at least reached some ends. Someone like Terrence Reedan had failed to manage even that, so it was no wonder that he was extraordinarily bitter.

Old Man Terrence ran out of time! Redemption had firmly escaped his grasp! Without achieving any measure of absolution, he faced an extraordinarily dreary ending. Weighed down by a troubled heart and unfulfilled ambitions, Ves genuinely pitied his older counterpart!

Privately, Ves resolved to never end up like Terrence Reedan! He should definitely do his best to achieve at least some solid contributions.

"There are so many design philosophies in the galaxy." The old man sighed. "Countless Journeymen and Seniors are doing their utmost to realize their dreams. Even if few will ever succeed to realize their design philosophies, it's amazing to think how many amazing ideas have turned into reality."

"It is the reason for our existence." Ves affirmed.

"Indeed. While mech design isn't the only field that produces constant technological innovations in this age, it is the biggest driver, no doubt. Not

even the CFA can match the breakneck technological progress the MTA has achieved, although they are probably close."

"What does the CFA think of neural interface technology?" Ves asked as he voiced one of his doubts. "I haven't heard any stories about the CFA implementing neural interfaces in their shuttles or ships."

"That's because the CFA and MTA fundamentally disagree on the value and utility of neural interfaces, Mr. Larkinson. Mechs are fundamentally dependent on neural interfaces to provide their mech pilots with the greatest degree of control over the machines. A mech is not a mech without a functioning neural interface."

"Neural interfaces aren't necessary for every mech." Ves frowned. "For example, it's optional for many industrial mechs."

The old man laughed. "Hahaha! Very funny! Let's not kid ourselves that mechs purposed for non-combat use are real mechs. The only mechs that define our current age are mechs designed for battle!"

That was true. No one raved whenever a company released a new industrial mech model.

"Back to my question though, why hasn't the CFA embraced neural interface technology?"

"There are several reasons why. First, it's not necessary. Human warships have functioned without any freaky, risky voodoo technology without any problems for several millennia. Second, the few attempts made by shipwrights to force neural interfacing technology onto warships have either ended in catastrophe or produced no measurable improvements at all!"

"There hasn't been a single successful implementation?"

Terrence shook his head. "Not as far as I know. Even if the CFA did manage to produce a beneficial result, their bias against neural interface technology is far too strong. They won't change their minds if the advantages are too negligible to bother."

"Can you tell me about the exact outcomes of their experiments?"

"I've only heard rumors." The old man shrugged. "As far as I know, warships are far too complex and run thousands, if not millions more systems and subsystems than a typical mech. All of their size isn't taken up by empty space, you know. If you attempt to establish a man-machine connection between a typical potentate and one of the most powerful, most destructive weapons of war that humanity has ever conceived, what do you think will happen?"

"The potentate's unfortunate brains will fry. Or worse."

"Their heads may physically explode." Old Man Terrence grinned darkly. "I know it sounds impossible, but trust me, neural interfaces are more than capable of overloading the heads of potentates!"

Ves very pointedly did not mention that he had indeed witnessed such a sight in person. "I wouldn't want to be the person responsible for subjecting a test subject to such an awful end."

"One of the causes of this extreme reaction is the sheer amount of data being dumped into the mind of the test subjects. They can't handle the sheer influx of data. In order to mitigate this problem and rein back the data that is being transmitted through the man-machine connection, the CFA researchers decided to filter, compress or limit most of the data that is being sent to the test subject."

"I take it that is the reason for the negligible results, right?"

"Right. So many functions and essential data streams are left out of consideration that the test subject barely has anything left to work with. What is the point of interfacing with a starship when most if not all of their human crew is still necessary to keep the systems running smoothly?"

"Starships aren't mechs. They haven't been designed to accommodate neural interface technology."

"Exactly, Mr. Larkinson. While the CFA still harbors some ambition in reducing the headcount that is necessary to run a fully-functional warship, their progress has been lackluster so far. Too much automation and delegation is required to make neural interface technology practical for starships."

"They still haven't found a solution up to this day?"

"As far as I know, no, but I may be wrong. One story I've heard is that some research teams have come up with a very radical premise to solve this fundamental problem. In order to make massive warships work with a single human mind in control, the CFA has thought about developing much better AIs. In fact, the holy grail they regard as the ultimate solution are sentient AIs!"

That almost caused Ves to jump out of his seat, alarming Lucky! "Sentient AIs?!"

"I did not misspeak, Mr. Larkinson! Reportedly, the CFA believes that as long as a starship is operated by a sentient AI, the test subject can safely interface with the vessel! The researchers have faith that their artificial partners can intelligently control and manage the throughput of data and assist in controlling the lesser functioning of the ship! In fact, the CFA hopes that sentient AIs can do so much more!"

"They failed though, right?" Ves nervously asked while he heavily petted Lucky.

"Miserably!" Old Man Terrence exulted in the CFA's misfortunes. "Their pampered researchers squandered so much funding and resources into this rabbit hole, only to find out that they've never managed to make a return on their investment. They found out too late that the rabbit is actually a black hole!"

Ves very pointedly did not mention the existence of a sentient AI who emerged from a crashed CFA warship called Sigrund.

"Is this really true? Has the CFA really failed to create a single sentient AI?" He asked.

"If they truly did, the Age of Mechs would have already been over! Once they cracked this vital barrier, their next generation of warships will have experienced qualitative improvements in so many different areas! There is no way they will continue to share power with the MTA!"

That.. did not sound realistic to Ves. "Wouldn't the MTA just steal the secrets of sentient AIs from the CFA and make them available for mechs?"

"Haha! As if the CFA would give their biggest rival the time to adjust!"

The old man did not have that much more to tell about the CFA. What he just passed on to Ves merely consisted of unreliable rumors spread among the circle of neural interface specialists.

Though Ves accepted that the information might be unreliable, he didn't believe so. From what he already knew about the CFA, the rumors made too much sense!

As Ves continued to weigh the information he received, Old Man Terrence nonchalantly waved his shaky hand. "Enough about me and my specialty. You wanted to have an exchange with me, right? So far, I've been doing most of the talking. If you have any sense of integrity in your bones, you should share some of your insights with me. Even if I am at the end of my life, I don't want

to die without learning at least one explosive insight that changes my perspective of mechs!"

"Ah, that's true. I've been remiss in that so far, Mr. Reedan. The insights you've told me is a lot to take in. I already knew that neural interfaces are complicated, but I had no idea how much dirt lurks underneath the surface!"

"Well, you can feel shocked in your own time!" Old Man Terrence barked with an unnerving degree of excitement! "Come now. Please air your dirty laundry. I want to hear whether your so-called 'metaphysical man-machine symbiosis' design philosophy is just as tainted as mine!"

Really now, was Mr. Reedan still a mech designer? Ves wanted to shake his head at the sight. The older man was no different from a nosy grandpa who wanted to swap naughty and embarrassing stories with others!

Chapter 1349 Late Regre

An exchange between two equal mech designers was a time-honored tradition in the mech industry.

Mech designers were more than capable of innovating by themselves. Yet they did not work in a vacuum, but were part of an immense community of fellow peers.

All of those mech designers shared a lot in common as they each studied many of the same scientific subjects. Yet these mech designers also diverged heavily when it came to their specialties.

Most of the time, mech designers weren't able or willing to share their exclusive insights with other mech designers. Why should they help out a competitor design better mechs by imparting them with their valuable insights?

Information was power.

Power had a price.

Therefore, information possessed intrinsic value.

The problem was that it was hard to set a price on the insights that mech designers accumulated over the course of their careers. The MTA made a decent attempt at it, but information held different values to every different mech designer.

Nonetheless, mech designers still hankered for insights from other mech designers who specialized in related fields.

This need led to the emergence of informal exchanges between mech designers.

While not something formalized in rules, the mech industry adhered to a number of informal customs.

First, exchanges between mech designers should take place between peers or equals.

If a Journeyman exchanged with other Journeymen, then that was completely fine.

If a Journeyman exchanged with a Senior, then that was not okay. The latter was so much more powerful and insightful that the former was at a heavy disadvantage. An unscrupulous Senior might be able to forcibly alter the research direction of the younger mech designer!

Aside from this custom that was meant to protect and benefit both sides, exchanges also had to be fair.

One mech designer couldn't keep demanding for insights without paying something in return.

Most often, the repayment came in the form of other insights. A mech designer who was interested in the related research of another mech designer could usually contribute a lot of useful insights in return!

For example, in this instance, Old Man Terrence's specialty lay in neural interfaces. This was highly relevant to Ves because his own specialty relied heavily on neural interfaces to express its effects.

As for Ves, his unique understanding of the man-machine connection could potentially revolutionize Old Man Terrence's use of neural interfaces!

The only problem right now was that Ves did not like to share his secrets. While he was willing to reveal some lesser insights, that didn't leave him with a lot of choice.

Nonetheless, Ves had an obligation to reciprocate Old Man Terrence's earlier generosity. The Chukan mech designer could have simply uttered some vague words for a few minutes, but he freely revealed much more.

Ves believed in the principle that mech designers ought to treat each other fairly if they behaved properly. Mech design was a noble profession and those who dedicated their lives to it should at least respect each other's contributions.

For example, this underlying principle was the reason why Ves and Professor Ventag allowed the heckling Professor Pendleton to attend their product reveal for the Aurora Titan.

Not everyone believed in respecting other mech designers. It wasn't unheard of for mech designers to violate the custom of equal exchange.

However, doing so was generally not a good idea. If word went out that a mech designer failed to reciprocate in an exchange, no one else would be stupid enough to enter into other exchanges with the offender.

Ves knew that if he tried to weasel himself out of this exchange with Terrence Reedan, the cantankerous old bastard would probably spread the news over his entire network!

Other outcomes such as Old Man Terrence dying just after Ves exited the headquarters also wouldn't work.

If Ves wanted to stick to his principles and avoid becoming a toxic pariah within the mech industry, he had to reveal some of the extremely valuable lessons he learned.

While Ves thought about telling lies, something he did as easily as breathing, his heart hitched up. His sense of self as a mech designer strongly discouraged cheating in this instance!

He gave up on trying to act in a dishonest fashion. Instead, he wracked his mind for something to say that wouldn't give too much away.

Even if Old Man Terrence only had a few years left to live, who knew what he might do with the insights imparted by Ves. His own interests had to be preserved at all costs!

After a bit of thinking while Ves continually petted Lucky's back, he eventually came up with a suitable topic.

"Alright." He began. "I'm sure you've studied my public record, since you are aware of how my design philosophy is defined. While we are both interested in the man-machine connection in relation to mechs, we focus on different aspects of it. You specialize more in the hardware and the measurable interactions between man and machine, while I focus on the unmeasurable aspects that take place through this exchange."

"I presume this is the reason why your design philosophy mentions metaphysics." The older mech designer noted. "By any chance, does this have to do with a certain secret known to Journeymen?"

Ves smiled as if in confirmation. "I'm not too clear about the mechanics behind the interactions that arouses my interest. All I can say is that mech pilots are

much more intertwined with their mechs than everyone realizes. The results I've accomplished so far is proof that I'm on the right track."

"According to the articles and records I've studied, your mechs exert a very real influence on the mood and emotions of both their mech pilots and any bystanders in the vicinity. This effect is even present in your virtual mechs, although in a much more diminished form!"

None of that was a secret by now. Ves readily nodded in admission. "I have been developing and refining my application of my design philosophy."

"It sounds like you've been doing more than that. Metaphysical man-machine symbiosis implies that your advantages only apply to the mech pilots of your products, but it goes beyond that. The ability of your mechs to dazzle and astound both bystanders and opponents has become increasingly more notable! I'm told that your latest mechs, the Transcendent Messengers, have even changed the direction of an entire state by their appearances alone!"

"That is.. true."

"How do you do it? How are you able to influence the minds of mech pilots and the people in the vicinity without resorting to mind-alerting tech?"

"Belief."

"..Belief?"

"I hate to say it to you, but part of what makes my design philosophy work is belief. I know I sound crazy, but what if mechs are alive?"

Old Man Terrance sent a glowering glance towards Ves. "Are you pulling my leg?!"

"Please don't judge this premise. It's no more unrealistic than trying to flatten the performance differences between different genetic aptitude grades."

That caused the older mech designer to subside a bit. "You're right. I've been too inflexible lately. The most brilliant mech designers often pursue unthinkable ideas."

"Exactly. What I just said doesn't necessarily make sense on the surface from what the general mech community knows about mechs. I had a different idea, and I was confident enough to base my entire design philosophy around this premise. The result is as you've seen."

"You did rise up remarkably quickly for someone with an oddball design philosophy."

"Mechs are alive. At least, they are capable of living. Rather than see the man-machine connection as a channel between a living human being and a lifeless, logic-based machine entity, think of it as an interaction between two living entities."

This time, it was Old Man Terrence's turn to experience shock! This insight, if true, blew up a major assumption that he had always held about mechs!

Perhaps he had been working on mechs in a very flawed fashion over his career! If Terrence Reedan didn't carelessly treat mechs as unliving machines, how far could he have gone? He might have been able to advance to Senior if he looked at mechs in a different light!

Regret poured out of Old Man Terrence's body as he hunkered down over his desk. This single revelation, though not definitely proven, was enough to put him into much greater turmoil than Ves himself experienced earlier!

On his part, Ves felt a little guilty about what he was doing, but this was what a professional exchange was all about. A fruitful exchange occurred when both mech designers could improve their mech designs in light of the insights they've received!

Ves already looked at neural interfaces in a completely different manner after hearing the old man's stories.

As for Terrence Reedan, the man looked like he obtained an insight so crucial that his core paradigms were in the process of shifting!

Minutes stretched on as the Chukan mech designer quietly submerged himself in his own train of thought. The single piece of information that Ves threw out was enough for the older Journeyman to make hundreds of valuable deductions!

As someone who frequently deliberated in his mind, Ves knew what it was like to enter into a thinking fugue. He remained silent as he let the old man process his new thoughts at his own pace.

Around fifteen minutes later, Terrence finally regained his wits. "My apologies, Mr. Larkinson. Your insight has caused me to revisit my past works and see if what I've just learned is relevant to them. I've designed a lot of mechs over the years, so it took quite some time to go through them all."

"You don't have to apologise. We are mech designers. Even if we are stuck here for weeks, it's worth it as long as we both come away with a broader outlook on mechs."

Besides, Ves comfortably passed the intervening time by playing with Lucky. The cat was so content that he was already dozing off on his lap!

"Let's return to what you've imparted to me. Telling someone that mechs are alive is a bold statement to make. But just as with the MTA, I believe that interpretation here is key. How do you define life in this instance?"

"That's a question that I'm still trying to answer myself, to be honest. Life can come in many forms, and this is what makes it so difficult to define it in exact terms. Some people claim the sandmen race isn't alive. Instead, they see the sandmen as something akin to sand-like processors gone rogue."

"I see." Terrence's eyes lit up. "If sandmen can be alive, why not mechs? Life does not necessarily need to come in organic, fleshy forms. The galaxy is so broad and diverse that life has taken surprisingly different shapes! From sentient clouds of gas to lifeforms that purely exist in energy form, it is not that big of a leap to say that mechs can also be alive!"

"To me, life means chaos. Life means spontaneity. Life means that mechs might behave in a way contrary to their designer's intention. A mech that can express its liveliness can both enhance or detract from a mech pilot's performance. It all depends on whether they like each other or not! If they do, then I believe that mechs and mech pilots can achieve amazing feats when they fully combine their forces! That is the meaning behind the symbiosis aspect of my design philosophy!"

Old Man Terrance practically looked dazzled at this revelation! His entire view on mechs shattered yet again, and he needed to do a lot of thinking in order to rebuild!

"Symbiosis. How strange. As a neural interface specialist, I'm well aware that the act of interfacing with a mech fundamentally alters the mind of a mech pilot. If your implications are correct, then this may be a two-way street! The mech alters the mind and brain structure of the mech pilot, but in turn the mech pilot alters something deeply hidden inside the mech!"

Ves smiled. It somehow gave him a lot of pleasure in converting another mech designer to his eccentric beliefs on mechs. "That has been my understanding for years. Perhaps the most crucial addition that I've derived from your insights is that this relationship may not be purely beneficial for both sides. If mech pilots can suffer from negative side effects, then it may be possible for the mech to suffer as well!"

This was the most practical insight that Ves had formed during this exchange! Symbiosis may not be present in every relationship between a mech and mech pilot!

What would happen if the mech hated their mech pilot and vica versa?

Chapter 1350 Declining Chuko

Ves exited from Old Man Terrence's headquarters in a contemplative mood. Gavin and Nitaa quietly followed him out as he slowly sauntered back to his guarded shuttle.

Meanwhile, the mercenaries readied their mechs for moving. Though the formation of landbound and aerial mechs surrounding a single shuttle looked excessive, no one laughed at the abundance of caution. Not even the Vindar System escaped unrest.

"Did you make any gains, boss?" His assistant asked.

"A lot." Ves paused. "More than I thought, actually. Professional exchanges between mech designers can be very fruitful. All the months of traveling to the Chuko Republic has already paid off. The insights I've gained from the exchange will definitely improve my future mech designs, in particular my next work."

His perspective on neural interfaces underwent a sea of change. No longer did he consider them to be carefully shackled components that performed a vital function.

While neural interfaces were still essential to mechs, Ves finally regarded them with the caution and apprehension they truly deserved.

Almost every neural interface utilized in mechs in human space extended the influence of the MTA! By tweaking the safety and performance parameters of each neural interface model they regularly published, they could discreetly

push through humongous regional changes that effectively strengthened or weakened the amount of expert pilots that emerged at a given star sector!

Worse, Ves had the feeling this was only the tip of the iceberg of the MTA's manipulative dealings!

During the exchange, Old Man Terrence effectively opened one of the closets of the MTA, revealing the skeletons they hid inside.

Yet a huge and immensely powerful organization like the MTA possessed hundreds, if not thousands of closets! How many skeletons had they buried over the years since they assumed power?

The impression that Ves previously held towards the MTA as a powerful, self-serving but largely neutral organization had been thoroughly erased today.

The MTA may profess innocence and benevolence, but like any organization, it wanted to exert the power it accumulated to further its own agenda.

In short, Ves recognized that the MTA was inevitably no different from any other organization run by humans. It was greedy, hypocritical, duplicitous and above all else ruthless.

To be honest, he had already started leaning towards this direction. Becoming aware of the existence of factions within the MTA such as the Rim Guardians and the Prime Humans already hinted that the organization was anything but free from the pursuit of greater power.

As Ves still processed the revelations he learned, the group took a break. They ate lunch at one of the few upscale restaurants still in business in the vicinity. As Ves ate a sandwich, he retrieved a pouch from his suit pocket and sprinkled some powder on the toppings.

The stench of the spice spread over the dining table before the ventilation system quickly freshened up the air.

"No offense, boss, but I like the older you when you weren't picky with your food."

"What can I say, Benny. Geril spice is the best spice in the galaxy in my eyes!" Ves chuckled as he took a big chomp from his sandwich. "I'm kind of hoping to obtain some more, though. I'd like to build up a stockpile since it will probably be very hard to obtain more geril spice the further away we go from the Nyxian Gap."

"Meow."

Lucky also scrunched his face as he paused from munching the exotics placed in a bowl on the table.

Geril spice emanated such a pungent smell that his ability to sniff out juicy minerals became impaired!

Meanwhile, both Commander Cinnabar of the Battle Criers and Commander Meivin of the Dustravens looked at each other for a moment.

"The sale and distribution of food on Vindar VII is strictly regulated by the planetary government." Commander Meivin revealed. "Everyone here is subject to a quota of foodstuffs they can buy. It's necessary since import of food from foreign states has declined. I doubt spices, especially imported ones, are widely available here."

Ves halted in his chewing and directed a narrowed glance at his latest hire. The mercenary commander of the Dustravens looked like he knew his way around.

"I suppose there are people who don't necessarily agree with the measures?"

Meivin smirked. "Right. Not only that, but they're willing to pay a pretty good amount to express their disagreement. In a quiet place. Among like-minded people."

Aside from Commander Cinnabar, everyone including Ves found it hard to believe that people were still willing to splurge on food during times of deprivation. Where did these buyers get their money?

Still, Ves knew that this was simply the way the galaxy worked. Nothing was ever perfect and people with power always demanded more than what they currently enjoyed.

"You can take us to one of these... gatherings?" Ves obliquely inquired.

"I can, Mr. Larkinson. While the gatherings aren't really that big in Wilxyr and elsewhere on the planet, there might be some interesting goods for sale. Vander VII used to be a prosperous planet, and while most valuables have already been sold or traded away, the upper ranks are constantly sifting through their vaults and collections. While they hate to let go of their treasures, they hate eviction even more."

This was something very understable to everyone. Gavin scoffed as he sipped a cup of coffee.

"We might be able to pick up a bargain or two in the right circumstances, boss. Trinkets and other goodies aren't as valuable anymore to the former magnates of this planet. When their principal sources of income are cut off and their savings start to dry up, they won't care as much anymore about getting the best prices for their goods. The situation has developed far beyond that stage. The heavy trade restrictions also make it harder for these businessmen and leaders to sell them to well-heeled foreign buyers."

"That might be true, but some of the sellers are very stubborn about the value of their trinkets. The prices are all over the place. Don't expect them to conform to logic." Commander Meivin warned.

As they slowly began to wrap up their lunch, Ves asked another question to the local mercenary commander.

"How has Vindar VII still managed to stay upright throughout this persistent economic malaise?"

The Dustraven commander shrugged. "I'm not really sure either. We manage. We persist. We continue to hope for a better future."

"That sounds very optimistic of you, but..."

"Heh." Meivin smirked. "You don't think we can do it? Well, you're not the first foreigner who expressed skepticism. I still have faith. It's the only thing that still sustains people like me. Redwell Province is stronger than the Chuko Republic. Governor Alinc will see us through this crisis."

Like any patriotic Redweller, Commander Meivin put all of their hopes on Governor Riley Alinc. The provincial governor's proactive leadership and bold power grabs during her time in power had transformed the Redwell Province from an administrative entity into a highly autonomous power within Chuko.

Governor Alinc garnered a lot of praise and admiration from the Bloodwellers in particular.

Nitaa asked a question as well. "How big of a role does the conflict between factions play on Vindar VII?"

"Not that much." Commander Meivin sighed. "Even though the Vindar System used to be industrious, aside from the food production at Vindar V, there isn't anything worth fighting here. All we have left are ruined businessmen and disgruntled citizens, some of whom are looking for some way to vent their frustrations. At the top, a small collection of officials keep the situation as calm as they can so they can continue to rake in the bribes."

That was good news for all of them. Though some friction between the two main factions definitely took place, at least it didn't sound as if the fighting would spill onto the streets.

"Has the Hinson Protectorate stirred any trouble on Vindar VII?"

A scowl appeared on Meivin's face. "We've found plenty of signs. Their agents are remarkably elusive. It's sad to say this, but sympathisers for the foreign invaders are also rife on this planet."

Personally, Ves thought the Whitewallers had a good point. What was the point of staying loyal to the Chuko Republic when it was falling apart at the seams?

But then again, Ves did not grow up in the Redwell Province. He lacked the emotional investment of the locals, who seemed to be more than willing to endure some hardship in order to retain their collective identity.

Perhaps Ves might think differently as well if the Bright Republic ever came under threat.

Once the group wrapped up their lunch, Ves resumed visiting other mech designers to carry out professional exchanges. His great success with Old Man Terrence increased his expectations for the subsequent exchanges.

Unfortunately, the other two Journeyman Mech Designers he met in Wilxyr were much more reticent with their insights. Both of them were younger than Old Man Terrence and obviously still harbored hopes of making more accomplishments despite the bad business climate.

As the evening started to arrive, Ves exited the headquarters of the second mech company with a dejected posture.

"It didn't work out again?" Gavin asked.

"No. The catty woman inside wanted to ask way too much. Getting her to tell me her insights was like pulling out teeth. She wasn't interested in conducting an equal exchange from the start."

"Couldn't you have used your Devil Tongue to get her to change her mind?"

"I could." Ves ruefully smiled as they boarded their shuttle. "In fact, I planned to do so. Yet ever since I conducted an exchange with Old Man Terrence, I changed my mind. Applying pressure in these situations violates the spirit of professional exchanges. If my counterparts aren't willing to open their mouths, then they're probably not that good in the first place."

The most successful mech designers in the Age of Mechs each shared a few traits in common. The most relevant one to this situation was confidence. They were confident in their beliefs.

The two Journeymen he met before both behaved insecurely. That doused his enthusiasm to inquire after their insights. How valuable would their findings really be if they jealously guarded what little they achieved?

The disappointing visits brought Ves back to reality. His initial exchange with Old Man Terrence turned out to be an exception rather than the rule.

"I should try and exchange more with senile mech designers." He quietly muttered. "People with one foot in the grave are a lot more willing to share their accumulated wisdom."

He gained a lot from aging mech designers such as Professor Velten and Old Man Terrence. Their urge to express their regrets and teach the younger generation to avoid their mistakes made them a lot less reticent about sharing their insights.

Perhaps Ves should specifically tweak his schedule so that he could visit more dying mech designers.

"Let's call it a day. We can visit the black markets tomorrow."

Once they reached their hotel, they settled in for the night. Fe Nitaa insisted on remaining awake and on guard throughout the night. She had already taken some pills beforehand to stave off sleep for a few days.

Ves did not discourage her excessive caution this time. Despite the Battle Criers and the Dustravens maintaining a rotation of patrols outside the hotel, they could not protect him from threats inside.

Another reason why Ves found her caution to be prudent was because Lucky found a number of high-powered bugs and listening devices in his hotel room.

Though every hotel room he stayed in was monitored to an extent, they could usually be cut off with ease to accommodate paranoid guests.

These bugs were different. Not only were they more sophisticated and hidden than usual, they also continued to function after Ves disconnected the regular monitoring system.

Ves frowned as he pointed his Vulcaneye multiscanner at a seemingly normal flower vase.

According to the scan results, implanted deep within the stem was a tiny, microscopic listening device.

"Meow!"

"Good job, Lucky. Is this the final one?"

"Meow."

"Okay."

As Ves disposed of the flower by chucking it in the garbage chute, he began to frown. The presence of sophisticated bugs suggested that he was being stared at by a powerful individual or organization.

"Trouble is in the air." He whispered.