

Chapter 1421 Easy Fan

Everyone exerted their utmost into completing their tasks.

Not everything went perfectly. Plenty of problems occurred along the way.

For example, Ves had to be very creative in repurposing parts that belonged to other mech models in order to get the most intact mechs back to work.

The ramshackle nature of the three functional mechs caused him to feel pained every time he took a glimpse at them. Ves would never tolerate selling such awful machines! Gloriana would probably suffer a heart attack at the mere thought of presenting mechs in their conditions as her own works!

"Hehe. It's a good thing that I can still tolerate imperfection."

Ves was no stranger to messy solutions. His time with the Vandals prepared him well for these kinds of tasks. In truth, while the difficulty of the problems he faced today was little different from those he experienced on Aeon Corona VII, his capabilities improved enormously.

As a Journeyman, his affinity with mechs had undergone a qualitative improvement. Even if he worked with mechs that he hadn't designed himself, he easily understood the essence and logic behind their designs.

Fortunately, Lady Miralix hired some excellent mech technicians with considerable amounts of certificates under their belt. Their efficiency and competence impressed him so much that he even became tempted to poach them and add them to his personal workshop crew!

"Too bad they're Sentinels."

Ordinary people were highly reluctant to leave their home states, and the Sentinel Kingdom imposed a lot of bureaucratic hurdles if any Sentinel wanted to emigrate.

Aside from the complicated work the hunting team had done to the mechs, the remains of the Crown Cat presented a number of headaches as well.

Zeigra's carcass turned out to be harder and heavier than expected. Even in death, its resilient hide and bone slowed down the cutting process!

The crews working on the carcass broke or wore out a lot of cutting implements. In some cases, the workers even resorted to taking out their plasma torches in order to cut through the more resilient parts of the dead beast!

While the hide was already difficult enough to separate, the bones were even worse! The workers found it nearly impossible to cut through the neck bones of the beast so that they could fully separate the head of the Crown Cat from the rest of the carcass!

The body processors were forced to wait until the mech technicians managed to restore an axeman mech.

With great difficulty, the axeman mech took up its weapon and started to make careful chops at precise portions of the dead cat's neck bones.

Even borrowing the power of a mech did not lead to quick results. The axeman mech was far from its peak condition, and it also had to be careful not to spoil its aim. The chopping proceeded very slowly and only after a lengthy day did they succeed in separating the head.

Even so, work still proceeded without any interruptions. Everyone was riding high on morale after they achieved the most difficult portion of their hunt. All they had to do was to return to Kemila with their spoils.

During the final day where Ves and the mech technicians finally managed to get the Kinslayer back online, the Felixia Catstrikers were ready to return to their base in triumph!

The legged transports no longer carried many supplies and parts. Instead, their cargo holds housed all of the dismembered pieces of Zeigra. The Crown Cat grew into a very sizable and heavy cat when he was alive, so the transports all strained to support their own weight.

Before the hunting team took off, Lady Miralix first had to recover from her immense exertion. Strangely enough, the medical specialists still expressed some concerns about discharging her early, but the hunting team really needed her to pilot the Kinslayer on their way back.

As a custom mech, the Kinslayer was hardwired to accept only Lady Miralix. Any other pilot that attempted to pilot the tiger mech simply wouldn't be able to bring the mech online, let alone transmit any instructions to it because its systems refused to recognize the input of anyone other than its intended mech pilot!

This was a standard security measure that was very prevalent among custom mechs. After all, since its designers precisely tailored the mech to accommodate a specific individual, no one else ought to make use of these exquisite machines.

Locking the mechs to a specific mech pilot ensured that others who came into possession of them got a lot less value out of their prizes. They would have to tear apart half of its parts and fill up the void with new ones in order to solve the pervasive hardware locks embedded in so many parts!

If the hunting team wanted to enjoy the protection of the Kinslayer, then Lady Miralix's condition had to be well enough for her to pilot mechs.

As soon as she left the infirmary, she called up a succession of subordinates to get herself up to speed.

Ves met with her fairly quickly in a private compartment on one of the transports. After Ves provided his perfunctory report on the state of the functional mechs, they began to divert to other topics.

"I have to thank you, Mr. Larkinson." She tiredly smiled at him. "The Kinslayer.. has really helped me through the battle. All of the previous practice hunts I've been through has never made me feel so good in the cockpit."

"That's my job. I just hope you'll spread the good word among your fellow comrades."

"I'll be sure to do so. I'm very impressed with what you've done with my mech. Consider me a devoted customer to your products. I'll be sure to import some of your other products as well if I have need of them in the future!"

Until now, the LMC basically didn't maintain any presence in the Sentinel Kingdom at all. The semi-closed economy made it fairly difficult for foreign products to enter the powerful third-rate state's lucrative mech market.

Ves hoped that his hunting achievement on one of their famed hunting grounds might result in special treatment in the future. If Lady Miralix vouched for him and spoke on his behalf, then maybe the Sentinel Kingdom might become a priority market for the LMC in a few years!

The two started to become comfortable in each other's company. As Ves sat in his seat while stroking Lucky's back, they began to go over how the Kinslayer performed in battle.

"Zeigra hit really hard back then." She spoke, casting her mind back to the memories of that day. "I'm amazed my Kinslayer endured so much damage. If I wasn't so taken in by the fight, I would have begun to harbor some doubts about the durability of my mech."

"Mechs are more capable than you think. It's not just the expert mechs that are capable of miracles." Ves idly remarked.

"Do you really believe that?"

"Oh, I do. In fact, it's a core part of my beliefs regarding mechs. Every machine can be special if you care about it, right?"

She shrugged. "I'm not a technically-inclined person. I'm just a mech pilot. However, even without studying all of the modifications you've made to my mech, the differences has been very stark to me. Whatever you did has completely transformed its piloting experience. I don't know if I can ever go back to piloting a regular mech after piloting such a fantastic mech in what might be the most magnificent battle of my life!"

A lot of people started to accuse his mechs for harboring an addicting quality to them. While his critics hadn't outright accused him of going down the road of the Farund Affair due to the lack of hard evidence, a lot of potential buyers started to get in touch with those awful rumors.

From what he could tell from the reports that Calsie passed to him, the fear of getting brainwashed was quickly starting to become a major problem to the LMC! No matter how much proof his company provided to the public, a growing portion of the markets the company became involved in exhibited an increasing amount of vigilance towards its products!

When Ves witnessed Lady Miralix express so much love and devotion to her Kinslayer, he kind of felt the same way about his own work! The adoration she exhibited came across as very disturbing!

If he hadn't personally designed his own mechs, then his paranoia would have certainly warned him to stay as far away from the strange machines as possible!

Ves had a lot of work to do when he finally returned home!

For now, he was still some months away, so he turned his attention back to the present. He immediately thought of another problem on his hands.

"If we return to Kemila with Zeigra's frozen body parts, their ownership will pass on to me, right?"

"Right." She smiled. "I do not intend to stiff you on this matter. While I'd love to have the complete carcass, this is what you deserve."

"Thank you." Ves smiled back. There were upsides to doing business with fans! "I'm wondering what I can do with it, though. What do hunters ordinarily do when they return with such a valuable prize in their possession?"

"They can do much with a carcass. Even without a head, the body of a Crown Cat is still of considerable worth." She spoke. "Even if you recycle the flesh and bones into exotics and other materials, you'll still be able to recoup some of what House Laterna had fed the beast. Don't expect to gain much, though, considering that many exotics will lose their strength when processed in such a destructive way."

The same occurred when someone attempted to recycle a mech wreck. No recycling operation could ever extract the full value of the materials of a mech due to the degradation of exotics when subjected to heavy processing.

"I take it that most hunters don't do that, right?"

"No." She shook her head. "Most hunters have different ideas in mind. The parts of a huge cat are worth more than their constituent materials. This is especially the case for a Crown Cat like Zeigra!"

"So what kind of options do you suggest?"

"It depends on you, Mr. Larkinson. Some hunters see a lot of value in eating the flesh of a formidable huge cat. While eating their flesh can't be done without subjecting them to treatment in order to extract the toxic materials out of their tissue, if you want to impress a noble or high official, then serving them Zeigra steak is an extravagant way to do it! You've got more than enough meat to hold a barbecue if you wish!"

The suggestion didn't appeal to him. "No thanks. I'm not one for fancy eating."

"Another popular option is to turn your spoils into a trophy. There are very professional taxidermy companies in Kemila that would love to receive Zeigra's body parts. According to your wishes, they can treat the parts and piece them back together into a lifelike showpiece that you can use to impress your guests."

This sounded a bit more interesting.

"Is that proper if I don't have the head?"

"It's not a big deal if you attach an imitation head to a mounted body. The very best and most authentic method is to partially recreate the outer tissue with cloned flesh. This can get very expensive, but you absolutely won't be disappointed with the results!"

Ves didn't think he'd be interested in building up his own collection of hunting trophies, but now that the opportunity presented itself, he slowly came around to the idea.

Having encountered several incidents where his lack of fame, reputation and prestige posed a hindrance to his personal and business interests, he truly had to do something to tackle this shortcoming.

Bringing home an impressive mounted body of a formidable Crown Cat sounded like just the thing to impress the snobs!

Chapter 1422 Hunting Achievemen

The Felixia Catstrikers returned to Kemil in triumph. Though the hunting team emerged out of the tropical forest with just four shabby mechs and a handful of struggling legged transports, the entire city welcomed them back with open arms!

The city administrators prepared a festive welcoming party to celebrate their success in their Crown Hunt. Each huge game hunter dreamed of participating in the fall of a Crown Cat, but few dared to risk their lives to do so. That someone from Kemila managed to do so sent everyone in the city into a frenzy!

"Catstrikers! Catstrikers! Catstrikers!"

"Miralix! Miralix! Miralix!"

As the mechs and vehicles slowly but steadily passed through the avenues and boulevards that led back to their compound, a continuous mob of visitors yelled and cheered at the victorious hunting team.

Massive projections Each of them showcased the highlights of the rounds of combat the Catstrikers fought against Zeigra, giving everyone a good glimpse of how harrowing the battle against the Crown Cat turned out.

No one thought that Zeigra held back during the fights! He more than earned the reputation deserving of a Crown Cat, and his slaying made the achievements of Lady Miralix and her subordinates all the more impressive!

Ves watched over the enthusiastic crowd that continued to wave and show their admiration towards the procession. Both Kemilans and hunters from other cities had flown all the way to the city in order to witness the return of this now-famous hunting team!

He scoffed at the massive turnout. "House Laterna sure pulled out all the stops to raise Lady Miralix's profile."

As a daughter of the current countess and the head of the house, Lady Miralix most certainly enjoyed a lot of favor. Unfortunately, the rules and traditions of the house prevented Countess Laterna from showering Miralix with too many advantages.

Before her hunting team returned from the hunting zone, Lady Miralix was still a junior member of her house. The young mech pilot still needed to prove herself that she had what it took to represent House Laterna in a greater stage.

Now that she returned with Zeigra's as a hunting trophy, her mother no longer became constrained by the limitations that prevented her from investing more resources into her development.

"Now that Lady Miralix has passed her difficult trial in such a magnificent way, there's nothing left to stop the countess from boosting her daughter's profile!"

Though it sounded a bit unfair, Lady Miralix had to work for her success. Overall, the skills she developed in preparing and leading the Felixia Catstrikers would surely help her in her future leadership positions.

Even in the Sentinel Kingdom, few could boast of successfully hunting down a formidable beast that was just as formidable as a Crown Cat. For Lady Miralix to do so just a year after she graduated from the mech academy immediately propelled her to the forefront of her generation!

"She's not the only one who benefits."

As soon as the hunting team emerged from the hunting zone, his comm reconnected to the planetary network. He quickly received a message from the Galactic Hunting Club.

The organization added his name to their database and recognized his contribution to the successful hunt! Since a representative of the Club witnessed the hunt from start to finish, the Club quickly verified the achievement!

When Ves used his newly-gained credentials to access the Club's virtual portal, he discovered that it was just as he imagined. The organization's main

purpose was to register, verify and rate the notable hunting achievements of people all over the galaxy.

Browsing some of the lists of names quickly confirmed his impression that aside from the professional hunters, a lot of nobles and high dignitaries took part in dangerous hunts.

Ves even sought out a listing of hunters from the Bright Republic and found all kinds of familiar big names!

"Each of the five founding families are represented!"

Though hunting appeared to be a nobleman's game, even the prominent members of non-feudal states participated in this activity.

In contrast to the likes of the Tovar Family and the Ramzi Family, Ves had not found mention of any Larkinson in the database!

He snorted. "Of course my family wouldn't be mentioned. Hunting is a wasteful hobby! Joining the Mech Corps and fighting on the battlefield is where true Larkinsons are born!"

He still believed that hunting was just a game while war served as the true crucible for individuals looking to prove themselves. However, he recognized that the members of high society did not necessarily agree with this standpoint.

"Every noble and every member of high society has a vested interest in upholding the credibility of the hunt!"

Therefore, even if Ves did not care too much about the vain achievement he secured, he recognized its value among the highest circles of galactic society.

From here on out, he expected to enjoy some of the gains that Lady Miralix currently enjoyed.

As the hunting team finally returned to the confines of the compound, the party outside the streets proceeded onwards without the presence of the victors.

A lot of Catstrikers expressed interest in heading out into the city to celebrate, but Lady Miralix insisted that everyone completed their vital assignments before they received any leave.

The compound became a hive of activity as the members of the hunting team rapidly performed their necessary tasks. The Catstrikers rapidly stowed away their surviving mechs, sent Zeigra's body parts to the local taxidermy companies and kicked out the disgraced and formerly-imprisoned defectors.

In the meantime, Ves met up with the companions he left behind in Kemila. As soon as he reunited with Gavin, Nitaa, Crindon and the Ingvars, they all exhibited relief at his safe and sound return.

"You really worried us when you merrily disappeared into the hunting zone!" Gavin exclaimed.

Though Nitaa did not speak out, the intense worry in her eyes made it clear that she probably suffered through a restless period as well.

For a brief moment, Ves felt a little guilty at making his subordinates worry. While he still felt it was worth it for him to participate in the Crown Hunt, he recognized its impact on those who depended on his well being.

"It's over now." He smiled back. "For now, I don't have anything risky on the agenda. Let's move on and see what gains we can take advantage of. Let me hear what kind of business arrangements you've made when I was with the hunting team."

His subordinates had been moderately productive. Gavin arranged the early shipments of materials that Ves had ordered before. Crindon collected some

pertinent intel on the Circle of Mota. The Ingvars interviewed plenty of ex-Peacekeeper mech pilots who used to perform missions in the Nyxian Gap.

Ves received a brief summary of what they gained while also receiving the detailed reports to his comm for later reading.

Perhaps the only direct subordinate who hadn't been very productive was Nitaa. Ves had merely assigned her to follow Gavin around to make sure nobody hassled him while he conducted business.

"Has anything else happened lately that needs mentioning?" Ves asked.

"There is one development that requires your attention, sir." Nitaa spoke up.

"As you know, the frontier has been thrown into turmoil lately. The sandmen have become increasingly more active and escalated their raids on human-owned space."

"I know. What has changed?"

"The sandmen haven't let up. The entire frontier has turned into a warzone and the border states next to the frontier are finding it increasingly harder to repel the suicidal sandmen raids. Among them, Tomaris Federation is becoming one of the most hard-hit states."

Ves frowned when he heard that. Tomaris was one of the final destinations he had in mind to cap off his year-long tour. He wanted to pay a visit there because the state maintained an extensive association to the frontier.

He saw an opportunity to dust off his relations with the Swordmaidens at Tomaris!

"The news we've received from Tomaris isn't good, boss." Gavin added. He shared Nitaa's worry and wanted to dissuade Ves from visiting the place.

"The state is not only facing an increasing number of incursions from the sandmen, but it's also under attack by another enemy. The news is rather

vague, but whatever is plaguing the Tomaris Federation has led to a lot of panic. The state is in a full-blown crisis!\

\I see. I'll look up the news myself, but for now let's see what happens. The CFA probably won't allow the sandmen to remain unbridled for long. Even if they don't care about the border states, they can't afford to be seen as weak by letting aliens cross over into human space with impunity!\

Everyone expected the CFA to step forward in order to beat the sandmen black and blue. The powerful naval organization may even decide to exterminate the sandmen entirely for their unbridled attacks!

The only complication was the time it took for the CFA to mobilize its warfleets and muster up reinforcements from elsewhere.

After addressing the worrisome situation at the Tomaris Federation, Ves heard enough and decided to leave the compound. He paid a final visit to Lady Miralix in her office to bid farewell.

\You're leaving?\

\I am. I have a schedule to keep and I've already spent way too much time on Felixia. I initially planned to take part in the hunt for a regular huge cat.\

\Do you regret taking part in my hunt?\

\Of course not, my lady! Even though I spent more time here than anticipated, the gains I've made is much more valuable than anything else I could have achieved in the same span of time.\

The key here was that the hunt succeeded. If it failed, then Ves would have regretted his decision to take part in the venture! In fact, perhaps he wouldn't have the time to feel any regret because the vengeful Zeigra might have eaten him whole upon the hunting team's defeat!

"Before you ask, I am already starting to fulfill my promises to you. You can expect to receive invitations from the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association and the other organization within a day. In addition, the exotic you asked for is right here."

"You have the P-stone I asked for?" Ves shone his eyes in anticipation.

"Yes. Please inspect for yourself."

A gap in the ceiling appeared. A square container floated through the opening and landed on the desk. Ves immediately approached and picked up the box.

"Wow. That's pretty heavy." He uttered.

He quickly opened the unlocked container and found a bronze-green metallic rock resting inside. The exotic looked just as unremarkable as in the projections!

Caring nothing for Lady Miralix, Ves eagerly caressed his palm over the surface. The second P-stone differed quite a lot from the first P-stone he uncovered long ago in one of the many exotic sample marketplaces at Centerpoint.

If Ves didn't know any better, he would have mistaken the P-stones as different varieties of space junk.

Yet as Ves surreptitiously injected a mote of spiritual energy into the bronze-green metallic rock, it reacted the same as his first P-stone!

It absorbed and contained his spiritual energy!

Ves couldn't hold in his glee. He grinned as he realized that despite its different physical makeup, his second P-stone likely held the same properties as his first one!

If two samples of the same exotic existed, then more of them must certainly be out there as well! One of his greatest fears about the P-stones could be laid to rest now that he learned that it wasn't a unique phenomenon!

"I see you're very happy about that rock." Lady Miralix remarked, looking intrigued at what the big deal was about with the sample that her noble house long considered to be almost worthless. "What's so special about it that makes you so excited?"

He offered a dumbed-down explanation. "It's helpful to the development of my design style. My mechs will definitely become more distinct after I study the properties of this exotic."

That wasn't entirely accurate, but Lady Miralix did not need to know anything more.

After a bit of talking, the two finally concluded their successful cooperation and bid farewell to each other. Ves left Lady Miralix's office with a spring to his step!

Chapter 1423 Rocky Speculation

Ves spent one more day in Kemila before he planned to depart. Having returned to his hotel, he took the time to study the reports written by his subordinates and get up to speed with various other developments.

One notable point of interest to him was the deteriorating security situation at the Tomaris Federation. Sandmen fleets continued to cross the fairly porous border into human space and wreak havoc in human-occupied star systems for reasons that escaped every human.

No one knew why the sandmen had suddenly gone mad and attacked in such an unbridled way!

However, Ves had a feeling that he might know more about what was driving these insane attacks. The sentient AI he inadvertently released from the Starlight Megalodon may be the chief culprit behind these developments!

There must be a reason why Sigrund drove his fellow sandmen to pick a fight with humanity!

However, even though Ves suspected Sigrund's involvements a long time ago, trying to guess the motives of this bizarre artificial lifeform was an exercise in futility!

Sigrund thought nothing like a human! It didn't seem as if Sigrund cared a lot about the race it used to belong to, because the relentless incursions were really stretching the CFA's patience thin!

Ves even felt tempted to reaffirm his decision to visit the Tomaris Federation in person. He wanted to snoop around in order to figure out what in the hell Sigrund was up to these days!

"Really. Some entities are too dangerous to be left alone!"

He dearly wished to tip off the Big Two to the sentient AI's existence, but the unholy pact he made with the sentient AI prevented him from doing so. Ves knew that Calabast, the only other person alive who knew of Sigrund's existence, kept her mouth shut as well.

In fact, Calabast had previously warned him numerous times not to leak any hints!

Whatever damage he could do to Sigrund, the AI would certainly hit back twice as hard!

These constraints left him feeling helpless as he browsed the various alarmist news articles that spoke of the devastation the more successful sandman raids had wrought to the border states!

In particular, hundreds of thousands of citizens had died so far. The economic damage the sandmen inflicted affected the livelihoods of billions of Tomarans more!

Knowing that he could put a swift end to the incursions gnawed at his conscience. Too many people suffered from his inaction for him to dismiss the difference he could make.

So much for being an altruist.

"Well, I can't contribute to human civilization if everyone wants me dead or in captivity, right?" He joked.

Since he couldn't do anything about what kind of mischief Sigrund was up to, Ves completely pushed the issue from his mind. It wasn't his problem anymore.

Instead, he shifted his attention to more immediate concerns, such as studying the two P-stones he possessed while he awaited the completion of a couple of special orders.

Ves holed himself up in his hotel room together with Lucky. Once his cat activated his ECM field, Ves finally couldn't hold himself in and eagerly brought out both of his P-stones from their containers.

"Fascinating." He whispered as he compared them side-by-side.

Lucky curiously floated down and rested himself atop the grey P-stone.

While to normal eyes the rock appeared completely inactive and inert, Ves picked up a lot of activity from his spiritual senses!

The rock that imprisoned Zeigra's damaged spirituality seemed to leak out an angry aura as the spiritual entity inside detested Lucky's show of disrespect!

No mere tiny cat was allowed to step onto Zeigra's head!

Of course, Lucky arrogantly taunted Zeigra by settling down by patting the surface of the rock with his paws. The gem cat even bent down his neck as if to take a bite out of the P-stone!

"Stop that!" Ves admonished his cat. "You're not allowed to eat my P-stones! They're too rare to be treated as your food!"

"Meow!"

"I said no!"

"Meow meow!"

"Okay, okay! If I find a few more P-stones, I'll promise you can eat one!"

Only then did Lucky stop making a move on his P-stones. The cat thumped his tail against the surface of the grey rock one more time before he jumped onto Ves' shoulder.

Even though Ves felt a bit annoyed at Lucky, he did learn something useful out of the interaction.

While the P-stone did lock Zeigra in place, it did not prevent its prisoner from sensing other spiritual entities nearby.

"Can it see outside?"

Ves didn't know the answer to this question, but he guessed the spiritual entity probably couldn't see far outside its immediate vicinity.

"Well, let's see how similar these rocks are."

Both of them reacted to spiritual energy, but their interactions might differ. Perhaps they responded completely differently or possessed different capacities. Ves wanted to compare their respective responses in order to determine if he was dealing with just a single type of P-stone.

He first injected numerous quantities of spiritual energy into his second P-stone.

As far as he knew, the second rock behaved identically to the first rock. Ves was hard-pressed to find any differences!

"Aside from their different physical makeup, their reactions are the same!"

Next, he curiously pulled out Zeigra's rebellious and violent spirituality from the first P-stone and quickly dumped it into the second P-stone.

Though the huge cat's spirituality did not enjoy the experience, Ves noted with some satisfaction that the second P-stone apparently functioned the exact same way! It exerted a strong suction force that kept Zeigra's spirituality locked within its center!

"They're the same!"

Ves found it very odd that the two rocks could differ so much in terms of density and physical makeup but shared the same remarkable traits!

A part of him felt disappointed at this finding. If he found a P-stone that possessed a different effect, then he would have been able to expand his options.

"Still, this outcome isn't so bad. Since the P-stones aren't unique and since they share the same emission footprint, it's a lot easier now for me to obtain additional samples!"

In a way, the huge differences between his two P-stones helped him pin down some of their distinctive traits. The extensive lab results that Lady Miralix had passed on to him made it clear that both P-stones possessed the same emission footprint.

While it was very weak, it could still be measured with sensitive scanners! As long as Ves scoured the marketplaces for materials with the same pattern of

emissions, then he no longer had to scour all of the stalls and shops in person!

"Still, the only problem is that others might be on the lookout for them as well." He furrowed his brows.

His paranoia forced him to consider the possibility that the Five Scrolls Compact might be tracking the P-stones as well! Since the organization definitely appeared to be experimenting with spirituality, the value of exotics that could store both raw spiritual energy as well as spiritual remnants of dead entities might be considerable!

If the Five Scrolls Compact truly sought for P-stones themselves, then it would be a very bad idea for Ves to post an open advert for additional samples onto the galactic net!

"Does this mean I'm back to square one?" He frowned.

Not exactly. While he did not dare to announce he sought for exotics that exhibited the same emission footprint, he could still make his search easier in other ways.

"I no longer have to depend on myself to seek out additional samples!"

Before he made his deal with Lady Miralix, Only Ves possessed the ability to discern the P-stones. With the lab results in hand, Ves could now pass on the distinctive emission pattern that appeared to be unique to P-stone to trusted subordinates and task them with seeking out other rocks with the same properties.

Unfortunately, Ves did not possess the requisite 'trusted subordinates' who he could assign this tedious but important chore.

If only he had a shadow force in place that he could trust to perform this task discreetly!

Perhaps the only person who came close was Crindon, but Ves did not wish to send his only qualified virtual security expert away.

Another idea came to mind. "I don't have a shadow force, but Calabast certainly has! She has invested a lot of time and resources in building up a spy network!"

His eyes lit up. That was a great idea! They were partners anyway, so Calabast ought to be able to help him out on this front!

The only issue was trying to convey his demands to her in a secure fashion. Other than telling her in person, the only other alternative was to resort to the only other secure method of communication he knew.

"Looks like I'll have to pass on a parcel the next time I meet with a Shadow Courier."

Getting in touch with a Shadow Courier was fairly troublesome to him, though he already scheduled an appointment with one of them. Ves could pass on his parcel containing his instructions to Calabast at the same time he received one of his awaited packages.

Once he finished his rudimentary investigation on the P-stones, he put them back into their containers.

"Stay safe, P-stones."

Ves planned to utilize his first P-stone as a container for spiritual entities. His second P-stone inherited the old role as a battery for spiritual energy, though at the moment he still had to replenish a modest deficit.

"I'll probably recover in a week."

In fact, he observed his recovery rate and found to his surprise that he was generating spiritual energy at a higher rate than before. He took this change as evidence that his Spirituality had grown even more formidable.

Ves wondered if his Spirituality would continue to grow by itself. The other possibility was that his Spirituality grew in tandem with the advancements he made to his design philosophy.

"I've been making plenty of new discoveries lately, so that might lead to a lot of growth!"

The next day, Ves woke up and did his normal business in the morning. In the afternoon, Ves took his subordinates to a certain district in Kemila.

He had an appointment with one of the exclusive shops in the city.

As Ves and his entourage exited their aircar, they stepped onto a shopping street that was nearly empty of guests.

Most Kemilans still celebrated Lady Miralix's success! All the bars and other gathering places had become packed with revelers as they gushed over the expertly-edited battle footage released to the public.

"Let's go inside."

Ves entered a small but luxurious-looking clothing store. The boutique offered a sample of handmade, artisan wares, but Ves paid no mind to the products on display.

"Ah, Mr. Larkinson! Please proceed to my workshop! Your order is almost ready!"

The group entered a small clothing workshop in the back of the store. Various fibers, cloth, hides and other materials were strewn about the tables and open storage cabinets. The smell of strange chemical solutions suffused the entire workplace, causing Nitaa to crinkle her nose.

"Not toxic, but very unpleasant." She softly spoke to Ves. "The sooner we get out of here, the sooner my nose gets some relief."

"Bear with it for a while."

Ves approached the elderly man in an impeccably sharp and clean work uniform. A garment that carried a very familiar shade rested on the worktable before the proprietor of the shop.

"I'm almost done. I'm just putting the finishing touches on your order."

"I understand. Take your time."

The person working on the garment was one of the best tailors in Kemila. The man specialized in extracting the finest fibers and other materials from the bodies of huge cats and turning them into stylish clothing!

Though Ves ordinarily didn't care too much about what he wore from day to day, the thought of wearing an outfit made from the remains of a Crown Cat sounded very tempting to him! He eagerly accepted Lady Miralix's recommendation upon their return to Kemila.

Now that he came within sight of his next ensemble, he judged that the wait had been more than worth it! Even the others looked intrigued!

Chapter 1424 Silly and Dignified

As a craftsman himself, Ves recognized the skill and attention the bespoke tailor poured into his work. The old man had worked on many different materials extracted from a diverse selection of huge cats.

Ordinarily, Ves had to wait in line before the tailor started with his order. However, the tailor instantly set aside his current orders as soon as he received the opportunity to work with the remains of a Crown Cat!

"The fibers of a Crown Cat are some of the most difficult materials to work with." The tailor explained. "In many cases, they require extensive treatment and trimming in order to make them workable. The same goes for their hides. Only the lightest, most flexible and most pristine layer of leather can be worked into a garment suitable for humans."

"My order must have given you a lot of headaches."

"Oh, not at all! I can count the amount of times I've worked with materials taken from Crown Cats with one hand. These magnificent creatures are worthy of commemoration, and it is a dream of every tailor on this planet to work with materials derived from these famous beasts!"

Ves understood the tailor's sentiments. In some way, he considered his Devil Tiger project in a similar light. The challenges he set for himself pushed his abilities to the limit and stimulated him into developing many new solutions.

The sense of satisfaction in developing and completing such an exceptional work represented a seminal moment in his professional development!

Soon enough, the artisan finally completed his work. He carefully raised his final piece and placed it together on a table where identical pieces already rested.

"It is done."

A luxurious ensemble of clothing presented to Ves. From fur tufted boots to a rich and formal looking coat that imitated some of Zeigra's majesty, the entire outfit earned Ves and everyone else's appreciation!

"Wow!" Imon Ingvar uttered. "Boss, do you have any spare materials? I want an awesome outfit as well!"

Casella Ingvar quickly swatted her brother's head. "Be reasonable! You haven't participated in the hunt. You are not entitled to any of the spoils. Besides, custom outfits like these are hunting trophies in themselves! They're not as valuable if more copies of them exist!"

She was right. Ves purposefully ordered the ensemble to impress the people he would meet in the future. Though the outfit already looked impressive in itself, those who were part of the Galactic Hunting Club or were aware of his hunting achievement would certainly recognize its significance!

Wearing a garment made out of the materials extracted from Zeigra's remains was the same as wearing a hunting trophy on his body!

Hopefully, wearing his new outfit would finally put an end to instances where elite figures and exclusive establishments refused to do business with him. He was tired of being treated as a nobody due to his lack of reputation!

While Ves still didn't completely comprehend high society's obsession with reputation, he knew he would definitely make a strong statement if he showed up with this impressive outfit!

"Where is the changing room?"

Moments later, Ves emerged from his changing room looking completely different than before. Whereas Ves already looked quite decent with the formal business clothes that Gavin prepared every morning, this time he truly came across as a dignified leader!

The complete ensemble consisted of a long overcoat, a detachable hood, a fur-tufted cape, a robust pair of pants, a soft and pale dress shirt, a tight-fitting jacket suit, a shiny, dark pair of boots, a velvety pair of gloves, a thick leather belt with a buckle fashioned out of treated bone, and most peculiarly, a pair of decorative furry cat ears.

That last option perplexed everyone who saw him emerge from the changing room!

"You look really good, but... what's with the cat ears?"

"I like them. Why not? Don't I look good, Benny?"

"You do, but.. the cat ears make you look weird."

While his overall outfit was colored in the same shade of Zeigra's original rust-red coat, the tailor artfully varied the shade between the different pieces. The

old man also added some silver accents in the decorative frills and designs to break up the monotone look.

Though his other subordinates didn't have the courage to express their doubts, Ves could read their dubious expressions well enough.

If not for the cosmetic cat ears, Ves would have made a very dignified impression on everybody!

He smirked. What his subordinates didn't know was that he deliberately sought to elicit this reaction. While he wanted to appear impressive, he didn't want to come across as stiff and formal.

One of the key means of protecting himself was to paint himself as an eccentric mech designer! Indulging in strange and weird hobbies such as wearing fake cat ears on top of his head served as distractions that helped deflect attention to his many secrets!

"Do you think my cat ears are fine in their original color tone, or do they look better if they are dyed in black to match my hair?"

"Meow."

"Yeah. You're right. The contrast looks weird."

Despite that, Ves opted to keep them in their original red-rust shade. The more confounding he looked, the more he could take advantage of the confusion he sowed!

"I see you have prepared an extra pair of cat ears." Gavin pointed out.

"Yup. Don't you think they would make a lovely present for Gloriana?"

"Uhhh..."

No one wanted to wade in that minefield!

Ves ignored his perplexed subordinates and turned to the tailor. "A great work like this surely bears a name."

The man smiled as one fellow artisan to another. "Indeed. I call it the Pride of Dusk. Each Crown Cat is a prideful beast, but from what I have ascertained from the battle footage I've glimpsed, Zeigra is especially prickly when it comes to his pride. The cat fought majestically to the very end! Even in his death throes, I observed the stubborn pride that made him die unresigned."

"Pride of Dusk." Ves rolled the name off his lips. "That's a very solemn name."

"Dusk represents a sunset. Don't you think the shade of Zeigra's coat matches the shade of the sky of a fading sun?"

"Dusk also symbolizes a fall and the ending of an era. Zeigra's reign as the king of his hunting zone has come to an end at the hands of humans."

"Mmhm. Very aptly put, Mr. Larkinson. Take care not to suffer the same fate. I hope my work will serve as a continuous reminder that while pride and hubris has their benefits, take care not to indulge yourself to the point of becoming conceited. I have served many impressive clients such as you. A distressingly large proportion did not meet a good end due to their own arrogance."

Ves casually waved aside the words of warning. "That will never happen to me. I'm always humble!"

"Ahem!"

"Did you want to say something, Benny?"

"N-No, boss! I have to say that you look really good in your outfit! Personally, I think you could switch up your outfit but keep the overcoat. It adds the most gravitas to your appearance."

He nodded. "Good suggestion."

The tailor approached Ves and carefully inspected the fit, making quick adjustments here and there with his strange tools.

"Your new garments should all be very durable." He said. "While they aren't capable of absorbing shock or absorbing heat like actual combat armor, they won't damage easily if exposed to enemy fire or extreme environments. With proper care, my work will easily last for centuries!"

"Did you add anything else to my outfit?"

"No. Upon your request, I've left out all the usual components that my clients routinely wish for me to add. Mind you, it will get very hot for you if you step outside my shop dressed like this. The lack of climate controls embedded in my work will result in overheating!"

Ves smirked. "That's not a problem for me. My body is more than capable of handling some excess heat."

If there was one unintentional benefit that he enjoyed from Dr. Jutland's experimentation on his body, it was that his Jutland organ made sure that his body never grew too hot.

In fact, when his body encountered a chill, his Jutland organ was even capable of outputting some heat to warm up his body to an extent!

After he received some instructions on how to care for his outfit, Ves bid goodbye to the artisan and brought his subordinates out onto the streets.

The impact his appearance made became immediately evident. The handful of shoppers and locals within the vicinity immediately drew their eyes at him and his distinct outfit.

All of them pretty much recognized that his clothes had been made from the remains of the Crown Cat that recently died!

Ves indulged in his vanity for a moment before he entered the aircar in order to head to his next destination.

He and his group arrived at a large facility which emanated a very strong chemical stench. Different from the tailor's workshop, the place that Ves headed to next smelled a lot more industrial!

"Are you able to cope, Nitaa?" He asked with some concern as he knew his bodyguard possessed a sensitive nose.

"I've endured much worse. I'm also capable of blocking my nostrils whenever I wish, sir."

"That sounds handy."

The director of the facility greeted Ves and guided the new arrivals to one of the work halls. Though his new ensemble attracted a lot of attention from the director and the surrounding workers, they quickly went back to work.

Ves and his followers soon came into view of a giant, partial skeletal prop!

"Are those Zeigra's bones?"

"Indeed, Mr. Larkinson! We have already prioritized our work on the remains you've brought to our company. While we are still in the early stages, I promise you that Zeigra will look as formidable when he was still alive!"

"You claim you can treat and solidify Zeigra's original flesh, right?"

"Correct. Admittedly, it's our most expensive treatment, and the remains of Crown Cats are some of the hardest to transform. While Lady Miralix has waived all the fees relating to this commission, we can't accelerate this time-consuming process. It will be more than worth it at the end, though."

"I can imagine recreating the head takes time as well."

"Indeed. We are in the process of cloning a lot of tissue, but much of the head will still consist of imitation material. Some of the bones and tissue found in Zeigra's head is simply too difficult to reproduce in our labs. The cost will become incredibly prohibitive as well. I doubt Lady Miralix would want to be on the hook for so much money."

"I've already taken that in mind." Ves replied. "As long as the illusion of a whole body can be conveyed, then this imperfection won't matter in the greater scheme of things."

He could already imagine placing the complete mounted beast in the expansive lobby of the headquarters of the LMC. The sight of such a savage, frozen Crown Cat served as an excellent contrast against the display models already placed at the Mech Nursery.

"When will it be complete?"

The director mentally made some calculations. "Three months, maybe four if we encounter any serious complications. Crown Cats are very demanding to mount, and Zeigra's hide and body parts did not arrive in the best possible condition. Repairing all of the cuts and holes in the hide is a massive endeavor."

That sounded longer than Ves expected, but good work should never be rushed.

"If you do complete it, please send it on a secure shipment back to my company headquarters in the Bright Republic. Is that doable?"

"Certainly! We have shipped our mounted huge cats to clients all over the star sector! Please rest assured that our work will safely arrive at your intended destination within half a year!"

That was just about the time that Ves returned home, so the timing worked out.

"That's great. Please inform me if there are any delays."

Chapter 1425 Feature Creep

"Clothes make the man." Gavin said as they waited for their transit ride back up to orbit at Felixia's spaceport. The group had already departed the Asco Continent and returned to the cuddly Eron Continent. "Though I expected you to make a powerful impression on people with your outfit, I didn't anticipate you'd have that effect on cats as well!"

After receiving the Pride of Dusk, Ves decided to wear the full ensemble for a day.

The effect of his outfit was incredibly considerable. His previous business attire already made him appear professional, but plenty of people wore similar clothing. He never actually stood out if not for his entourage following him around.

Now, his rust-colored fur tufted ensemble never failed to draw everyone's fascination. The tailor had already done a fantastic job of processing the choicest of materials from Zeigra's remains to fashion the Pride of Dusk.

However, the recent explosive round of publicity surrounding the successful Crown Hunt instantly made the people in the know associate his new outfit to Zeigra's fall.

If they held any doubts about the authenticity of his clothing, then the subtle but unmistakable platinum logo of the Galactic Hunting Club on his garments laid them all to rest!

Anyone registered with the Galactic Hunting Club could scan the logo with their comms. The portal would instantly send an information package containing the details of the hunt. This included its standardized challenge rating as well as his personal contribution to the endeavor.

Those who lacked access to the database of the Club would merely be redirected to a public page containing a very incomplete summary of the hunt.

Apparently, the snobs saw no use in showing off their hunting achievement to commoners. Their vain and wasteful preoccupation might even result in a backlash, which Ves was sure would happen in the Bright Republic!

Therefore, while the average bystanders merely admired his impressive outfit, those of higher standing gave him looks of deep respect and apprehension. They knew that a man who materially participated in a hunt was not to be trifled with! People like Ves ought to be treated with respect no matter his actual identity!

Yet what caused people to look askance at Ves the most was the effect he had on the surrounding cats!

Some of the friendly, playful cats that normally brightened up the spaceport had stopped their usual antics. Instead, they approached and surrounded Ves as if he was a god among cats!

"Mrow! Mrow!"

"Miao. Miao. Miao."

"Mew mew mew!"

Literally hundreds of cats sat in a circle around Ves, causing him to attract far too much attention than he anticipated. Frankly, the procession of cats was driving him mad!

"Shoo! Shoo! Go bug someone else for once!" He vigorously waved his gloved hand.

"Miao!"

"I'm not a Crown Cat, you stupid feline! I'm human!"

\ "Mewwww!\ "

Ves instantly pulled off the decorative cat ears from his head. \ "These are fake, you see?! I'm human!\ "

\ "Meow!\ "

Lucky angrily hissed at the surrounding cats. Ves belonged to him! All of the other cats had no right to receive his pampering!

Ves and Lucky had to deal with the unwelcome fascination of the cats for quite some time until their large transit shuttle finally took in passengers. As Ves entered the vehicle, the cats bumped into an invisible field that automatically repelled their entry.

\ "Miao! Miao! Miao!\ "

That didn't stop them from scratching the field in order to follow Ves inside!

\ "That's over now.\ " Gavin sighed. \ "If those cats followed you back to the Barracuda, I don't know how we can get any work done!\ "

As Ves and his group slowly made their way back to the Barracuda and the fleet that awaited them in space, they all looked forward to their return to normality.

Felixia may have been a fun and novel destination, but they all had their fill of cats by now!

Ves on the other hand studied his new garments with an intrigued expression. The strange reaction he elicited from the cats of Felixia aroused some strange ideas.

As the group reached the orbital space station, they transferred to another shuttle that brought them back to their ships.

The Ingvars returned to the Ion Tracker in order to resume their training with the Battle Criers.

The rest boarded the Barracuda. Once everyone settled in, the fleet soon transitioned to FTL and traveled to their next destination.

As Ves entered his stateroom, he removed his Pride of Dusk and laid its pieces onto his desk before changing into a plainer outfit. Since he was in public, he felt no need to impress anyone.

"Let's see if I can do anything with my new acquisition." He grinned.

An idea came into mind as he witnessed how much attention the Pride of Dusk attracted. It already carried a powerful effect from its remarkable cut, exceptional materials and impressive story behind its creation.

Could he make his Pride of Dusk more distinct? What if he applied some of the techniques he usually reserved for his mechs and mech designs onto the outfit meant to raise his stature?

Two additional questions emerged shortly after he entertained this radical suggestion.

First, was it even possible?

Second, was it a good idea?

He grinned. "I have no idea what I'm doing, but I guess I'll find out!"

Ves first instructed Lucky to activate his ECM before proceeding to his next step. He opened the box that held the first P-stone and retrieved the rock from its container. He studied it for a moment before placing it onto his desk.

"Do you recognize the pieces of your old self?"

Evidently, the spiritual entity did indeed sense something intimately familiar to itself, because Zeigra's spirituality frantically tried to escape its prison!

However, no matter how much Zeigra fought against his bonds, the P-stone's cruel suction force firmly kept the spiritual entity in place!

"Hahaha!" Ves laughed.

The materials that made up the Pride of Dusk may have gone through extensive processing, but they still retained their affinity for Zeigra's spirituality!

Confirming this interaction meant that his idea had a decent chance of working!

"What if I'll put you back in a portion of your old body? Hmm? Would you like that, Zeigra?"

As usual, the angry and furious spiritual entity ignored his words. It simultaneously wanted to lash out at Ves while urgently trying to break through its prison to return to the portions of his old body!

Ves shook his head at the sight. Zeigra had not grown any tamer since his spiritual imprisonment! In fact, he doubted that the unruly Crown Cat could ever be tamed!

This was also why he decided to keep the Devil Tiger as a one-off mech without claiming credit to its design. If Ves attempted to commercialize its design, he would doubtlessly lead a lot of mech pilots to their ruin!

"It's such an enormous waste to insert my first complete spiritual entity onto a design which will only ever produce a single copy."

To be honest, the amount of time, effort, money and favors he expended on his Devil Tiger project exceeded that of his prior five original mech designs!

For a project he once considered as a way to fulfill a pair of Upgrade Missions and an opportunity to experiment, it had ballooned into so much more.

Ves recognized that he was guilty of the cardinal sin of feature creep. During the development of the Devil Tiger, he kept tacking on new expectations and requirements onto his mech design!

"Yet... even if I'm guilty, so what?"

Though the scope of his design project vastly exceeded his initial demands, he didn't consider that to be a bad thing in this case. Ves put less stock in completing his Upgrade Missions and more emphasis on the amount of progress he made to his personal development.

"Already, this project has been worth it when it comes to all of the new spiritual techniques I've developed!"

Of the techniques he recently came up with, spiritual restoration became his new favorite. Breaking spiritual entities or gathering disjointed pieces of them to bring them back to life by merging them with his own spiritual energy was a very complicated process.

He still didn't know how everything worked!

Yet considering how well his first attempt worked out by creating Vescas, the new technique held a lot of promise. The more he explored this new avenue, the more refined his future spiritual products turned out.

He'd have to delve much deeper into the path of life, though. The creation of life was a very complicated process, and his crude attempts so far exposed him to how much depth this field contained!

"Well, let's proceed with the next step." He muttered.

Ves wasn't stupid enough to take out Zeigra's whole spirituality and dump it all into his new outfit. He expected that Zeigra's spirituality was way too voluminous and powerful to be contained by a bunch of garments.

Perhaps one way to address this issue was to carve out portions of his P-stone and embed them into his clothes.

However, Ves did not expect that to go well, since the suction force the tiny pieces exerted would probably be too miniscule to keep the spiritual entity in place!

No. You don't get to return to your old body entirely. Just a portion of you should be sufficient to my purposes. Get ready, Zeigra, because this will probably hurt!

Instead of trying to infuse the Pride of Dusk with Zeigra's whole spirituality, Ves intended to do so with only a small fragment!

Of course, obtaining this fragment was easier said than done. Ves knew he wouldn't be able to convince Zeigra to part with a portion of his spirituality in any circumstances, so he mustered up his concentration and his free-floating spiritual energy into a blade.

"Cut!"

Ves proceeded to attack Zeigra's spirituality with the blade he formed!

No result!

"Ouch!"

Both Ves and Zeigra suffered from the collision.

"Damn it, you're still too tough!"

Ves realized that he was going at it the wrong way. Instead of trying to cut into Zeigra's spirituality like a skirmisher mech stabbing its knife against the chest plate of a knight mech, he should instead target its weak points!

Due to the repercussions of Zeigra's corporeal death and subsequent deterioration, the Crown Cat's spirituality looked far from okay! Various gaps

and wounds still encompassed its entire makeup. Any of these wounds presented an easy opportunity for Ves to cut out a valuable spiritual fragment!

Like a butcher honing his blade in front of a carcass hanging on a hook, Ves clinically studied Zeigra's trapped spirituality to find the best vulnerability to exploit.

He had to take care to cut out the right proportion.

Too much, and Zeigra's spirituality would incur too much damage to the point of spiritually lobotomizing its main consciousness!

Too little, then the effect to his Pride of Dusk would be too subtle, defeating the point of this experiment.

After a bit of consideration, Ves decided to harvest a spiritual fragment that was small enough to encompass his overcoat. He wanted to reduce the effect of Zeigra's spiritual fragment when he removed and hung up his overcoat. Too much of an angry cat wasn't necessarily conducive to all of his business transactions.

"Well, here goes!"

It took a bit of fumbling, but he eventually managed to jam his spiritual knife onto one of the medium-sized openings of Zeigra's spirituality. With a healthy application force, he leveraged his spiritual strength onto the trapped and immobile spiritual entity and violently dislodged a jagged portion from the whole!

Zeigra spiritually lashed out in pain and agony at the loss, but Ves paid no mind to the pain he inflicted on the dead cat. Instead, he grabbed the loosened portion and pulled it out, resisting the suction force from the P-stone.

"It's already deteriorating!"

Ves quickly squashed and compressed it together in order to form a crude fragment, which stemmed but failed to halt the deterioration process.

"Well, let's see if this works!"

He quickly shoved the fragment into his new overcoat and waited with baited breath.

The fragment met hardly any resistance as it settled into the spiritual space of the overcoat of the Pride of Dusk. In fact, it settled in very nice, as if it rightfully belonged in it from the start!

"Success!"

His prediction came true. The overcoat did indeed possess the capacity to host a spiritual fragment!

Chapter 1426 Taking Shape

His overcoat gained a lively aura. Though the addition of a small spiritual fragment taken from Zeigra's surviving spirituality did not encompass a lot of strength, the effects on his coat became very noticeable at close proximity!

Every other fragment that Ves made use of up to now went on to become the design spirits of his mech designs! The scale and scope of such uses was on a completely different level from now!

The size of his coat was many times smaller than the size of a mech, which meant that its aura emanated from a vastly smaller surface area!

"In addition, the physical interaction between a human and another human is a lot more closer than the interaction between a human and a mech!"

Most bystanders kept a very healthy distance from a mech, even if they weren't active. Nobody wanted to be squashed under the feet of these massive machines!

The same didn't apply to humans, though with the aggressive, prideful and intimidating aura his coat acquired, Ves may as well exhibit some of that effect if he wore it around his body!

"I like it!" He grinned.

Though the aura's ire directed a lot of animosity towards himself, Ves did not take it to heart. This little bit of pressure did not disturb him at all. The spiritual fragment locked inside his overcoat was as harmless as a kitten, so why should he be worried?

Ves patted the soft but firm surface of his coat in satisfaction. "I wonder how other mech designers will react to my appearance!"

He tested it out by calling both Gavin and Nitaa to his stateroom. As soon as they entered, their eyes practically bulged as their minds and bodies instinctively reacted as if they were being stared at by a predatory beast!

"What did you do, boss?!"

"Hahaha! Nothing much! I just made some adjustments to my coat!"

"Well, whatever you did, it's a lot like coming in close proximity to one of your mechs!"

"That sounds about right."

"I'm afraid you overdid it, though. I can't relax in your presence while you're wearing your coat!"

Though Ves easily resisted the intimidation factor of his spiritually-enhanced overcoat, others were not so comfortable. When Ves removed his coat, its aura still radiated a powerful presence while it remained in sight!

He frowned a bit. "Hmph. Behave!"

He mentally swatted at it with his Spirituality, but that did not do anything to make the spiritual fragment subside. In fact, Ves noticed that it still possessed a connection with Zeigra's main spirituality!

This meant that the fragment in fact did not possess a separate consciousness! Unless the Crown Cat himself changed his mind about Ves, his overcoat would continue to emanate a hostile and intimidating aura!

He scratched his head. "Benny, go retrieve a coffer something."

When Gavin rummaged through the closet and returned with a spare briefcase, Ves folded his overcoat and stuffed it inside.

Once he closed the briefcase, a portion of the intimidating aura disappeared. Though Ves still perceived some tension in the air, it seemed that putting his overcoat out of sight succeeded in dampening his overcoat's effects.

"It's much better now that the coat is out of sight." Gavin sighed.

Nitaa concurred. "Maybe a thicker case works better."

"I doubt it. Some things can't be blocked no matter how many layers are in the way."

From what he knew of auras, only distance weakened them due to the inverse-square law. Right now, Ves hadn't found any materials that blocked auras outright, though perhaps he might find one in the future.

One thing he found curious was that other people like Gavin and Nitaa clearly perceived the intimidating aura emanating from the coat while not sensing a lot of abnormalities from the P-stone!

Ves, Lucky and to a minor extent Nitaa all perceived Zeigra's hostile spirituality, but Gavin completely ignored the P-stone. Apparently, P-stones possessed a minor isolating effect that only worked on spiritually weak individuals.

"Curious." Ves scratched his chin.

In any case, he got the results he wanted, so he ended the experiment. As Gavin stowed the briefcase and the other pieces of his new outfit in the closet, the distraction ended.

After taking care of his other business, Ves resumed his work on the Devil Tiger project.

"It's been a long time!"

As Ves projected the main schematic of his unfinished mech in front of his vision, he compared its dimensions to Zeigra's physical appearance when he was still alive.

The two diverged in several aspects. Zeigra used to be a lot bigger, stronger and heavier. The Devil Tiger relied a bit less raw strength and immense size and more on its mobility to get the better of its opponents.

"Should I scale up my design?" He wondered.

He quickly ruled out of the option. Increasing its proportions was not as simple as magnifying all of its components by thirty percent or so. Ves did not look forward to initiating a complete redesign just to accommodate its design spirit!

In any case, it wasn't as if his mechs no longer worked if they carried divergent design spirits. His Aurora Titan worked fine despite hosting a non-human design spirit.

The intention of his mech designs was not to bring the deceased back to life. Neither did he seek to clone the capabilities of powerful humans or exobeasts.

He saw no future in imitating or emulating products developed by nature or products cooked up by biotech specialists.

Ves believed that proper mech designers ought to be capable of creating entirely new and original mechs that exhibited the strengths that fit them the best!

"I shouldn't lose sight of the purpose of my work. My mechs still have to function as products that serve a useful purpose!"

He knew he had a tendency to romanticize his mechs and mech designs. The danger to this was that he could easily lose perspective of the nature of his profession and the actual demands of his customers.

Once he sobered himself up, he rejected any thoughts of trying to turn the Devil Tiger into an artificial copy of Zeigra's formidable body. It just didn't make any sense from a fundamental design perspective. His tiger mech design performed the best if it remained in the medium weight class!

Still, Ves saw plenty of areas which could use some adjustments. He wanted to steer the Devil Tiger away from a design that relied heavily on ambushes and maneuver warfare to one more suited to brawling and dueling. This would make the Devil Tiger match the brutal and prideful inclination of its design spirit.

Before he visited Felixia, Ves hadn't made up his mind on the final vision of his mech. Now that he returned with Zeigra's spirituality, the end product was no longer shrouded in fog. He knew exactly what he was working towards!

"Let's get to work!"

As the fleet quietly traveled to its next destination, Ves dove into his design work. With the P-stone trapping Zeigra's spirituality resting on his desk, he comfortably basked in the Crown Cat's hostility and used his sensations to inspire him in his design work.

His recent successes along with the rewards he received put him in a fantastic mood. Even the temporary deficit in his spiritual energy did not hinder him significantly in any way as his passion overflowed as he worked.

Several days passed as Ves achieved rapid progress in the completion of his design. While the incorporation of ASMAS into his mech design meant that Ves had to do a lot of things differently, he eagerly tackled the novel problems that came with configuring the pure ASMAS and substitute ASMAS into empowering the Devil Tiger to the fullest extent.

The momentum that Ves accumulated caused him to set aside every other distraction in an attempt to complete his mech design as soon as possible.

Many problems seemed trivial to his eyes, and those that posed a larger hindrance hardly stalled his momentum. Within a matter of days, his incomplete design rapidly exhibited fewer gaps.

Even the fleet's arrival to its next destination could not bring Ves out of his design frenzy. He brushed off Gavin and Nitaa's attempt to urge him to meet his appointment on the surface of the planet they orbited.

"I CAN'T STOP NOW!" He shouted as his shaking eyes kept staring at the zoomed-in portion of his mech design. His hands neurotically flicked around the projection to add, remove and adjust various components to his design. "I'm on a roll here! Tell whoever I'm meeting on the planet to reschedule my appointment!"

"They won't like it, boss."

Ves snorted. "They're mech designers! They should understand the importance of when a fellow colleague is in an inspired design mood! Now get out and let me work in peace!"

Once he got rid of his latest distractions, Ves spent an entire week on completing his design.

As the Devil Tiger became more and more whole, it began to embody some of the aspects of its name. The mech that Ves had shaped truly looked and fought like a devil in the form of a tiger!

Not only was it a devil to its opponents, it also posed a risk to its mech pilots!

When Ves had reached the stage of adding in and configuring its cockpit, Ves briefly paused when he had to decide which neural interface model he should incorporate into his design.

Previously, he considered utilizing a neural interface model with very loose safety limitations.

However, he made this decision before he picked up an extremely hostile design spirit. What would Zeigra do if he obtained the power to screw around with the minds of the mech pilots of the Devil Tiger?

Ves grimaced. "Nothing good would come out of that."

Should he change his mind and opt for a safer neural interface model? One with stricter safety limits would mean the mech pilot wouldn't be able to establish a deeper bond with the Devil Tiger. That went against the purpose of his experiment and the vision he laid out for his mech!

"The Devil Tiger is and will always be a double-edged sword!"

Still, it wouldn't do his machine any good if it immediately killed its mech pilot right at the start. Ves therefore opted for a different approach to the problem.

First, he scoured the galactic net for a neural interface design that the MTA never authorized for usage.

It wasn't very hard to find one, as various black market organizations seemed to find some uses for them for some reason.

"They probably use them to boost the performance of underground dueling mechs." Ves loosely guessed.

It was an easy way to improve the odds of winning, but once the mech pilots encountered mishaps, it would be all over for their careers! Even their lives may be lost due to the severe repercussions of using these unsafe neural interface models!

Once Ves grabbed a black market neural interface model suited for tiger mechs, he dove into its programming and adjusted its safety parameters.

Whenever a new mech pilot interfaced with the Devil Tiger, its neural interface would start off with relatively standard safety limits.

Only when the mech pilot spent a few hours with the Devil Tiger would the temporary safety limits slowly retract.

This way, both the mech and mech pilots enjoyed a brief period of time where they could get to know each other under safer but more limiting circumstances.

If the Devil Tiger liked its mech pilot, then the loosening safety limits meant that the mech pilot would benefit from the closer bond he formed with his mech.

If the Devil Tiger hated its mech pilot, then the lifting of the restrictions would definitely lead to various shenanigans.

Ves chuckled at the thought. "I shouldn't make it too easy for Zeigra to get rid of its mech pilot! He has to work for it if he wants to get rid of someone he doesn't like!"

Chapter 1427 Spirituality and Technology

As his mech took shape, Ves wondered on how he should address the later stages of the design process.

Ordinarily, it would have been irresponsible of him to finalize his design and begin with fabricating a copy intended for consumers.

However, his Devil Tiger project was not like any of its other design projects. Its exorbitant cost, illicit nature and various radical design aspects meant it was a bad idea for Ves to produce and test a physical prototype!

Besides, Ves was confident that the Devil Tiger's theoretical performance wouldn't diverge from its actual performance.

Why should he adhere to a traditional design process anyway? Even if his mech came with a major flaw or two, Ves wouldn't incur any penalties.

The target audience for his Devil Tiger consisted of Nyxian pirates! Ves cared nothing for their wellbeing! In fact, Ves considered them as potential test subjects ready to be subjected to various experiments such as his Devil Tiger!

"Even if there's a couple flaws, my mech is inherently self-correcting! I'll intervene in person if necessary!"

As a mech meant to serve as an experiment, Ves wanted to access the data his Devil Tiger accumulated. He knew that it would be very hard if not impossible for the mech to transmit its data back to him, especially if the machine failed to piggy back a connection to the galactic net.

Ves tried his best to program some hidden routines inside the core programming of the mech. Once it connected to a local network with access to the galactic net, the Devil Tiger would immediately compress and encrypt its log data before uploading them to a random, publically-accessible storage site.

As long as this happened, Ves would always be able to retrieve the log data through anonymous means. This way, he could keep track of the Devil Tiger usage and whether it performed as intended.

"This is a two-way street." Ves smiled. "As long as my mech can access the galactic net, then it isn't limited to uploading data. It can also receive new instructions!"

Ves programmed in various obscure addresses it had to keep an eye on whenever it accessed the galactic net. Once it encountered an encrypted file on one of those addresses, the mech would download and decrypt it in order to process the new instructions he provided.

This way, he could continue to tweak, update and modify the Devil Tiger's design from remote! The malleable, smart metal nature of his mech meant that the mech required no human intervention in order to adjust its own design!

"It's brilliant!" He grinned.

Of course, these measures also came with various downsides. The exchange of data took place within the most open and insecure communications network in the galaxy! Ves could not have picked a less secure network than the galactic net!

Though Ves incorporated heavy encryption onto the data packages, he was under no illusion that it would hold against determined decryption attempts.

Ves couldn't do much about attempts to crack the encryption of the log data. There shouldn't be too much harm in it as long as nothing in the logs contained any clues that led back to his identity.

What he worried about more was if some joker mech designer figured out a way to imitate the process that Ves used in updating the instructions of the Devil Tiger. If this third party utilized the same encryption method and uploaded a new set of instructions onto a specific address, then they would easily be able to hijack Devil Tiger!

"I need an extra layer of security!"

After a bit of thinking, he came up with a novel way to reduce the chances of third party interference.

Even if a hacker managed to upload some instructions onto the data banks of his Devil Tiger, the mech would not accept them unless its design spirit inputted a code that unlocked the final pass!

"No matter how good a hacker is in intruding in electronic systems, they can't do anything to influence a design spirit!"

Manipulating them was unique to Ves, thereby granting him sole control over the most core aspects of the workings of his mech.

Of course, Zeigra's spirituality shouldn't be the one who decided which instructions to accept. Instead, Ves configured the arrangement in a way that it would only be able to unlock the final pass if Ves intervened directly!

"The Pride of Dusk can help!"

His new overcoat housed an active spiritual fragment of Zeigra. Ves noted that it shared its consciousness with the main spirituality that was locked in his P-stone.

"This essentially means I can observe and manipulate Zeigra's spirituality from remote!"

This was a very novel arrangement and Ves felt very enthused about implementing it for the first time. If everything went well, then Ves might apply this arrangement to his other works.

"Keeping pieces of my design spirits close to my person is a good way to rein in my more unruly design spirits."

The approach swung the pendulum away from the path of life and closer to the path of determinism, thereby injecting a crucial measure of control over his Devil Tiger!

Ves would not allow anyone, not even Zeigra's spirituality itself, to ruin his experiment!

Programming all of these additional features into his mech entailed a lot of extra work. Ves recognized he had to do a thorough job in order to close as many loopholes and exploits as possible. As long as he left out a single opening, some clever hacker or mech designer would surely jump in to take advantage of his Devil Tiger!

He especially encountered a lot of difficulties in envisioning the interaction between his design spirit and the systems of his mech. Ves had to revisit some of his existing mechs, study the extent to which their design spirits influenced the operation of his mechs, and extrapolate from there.

Trying to get both spirituality and technology to work together felt like trying to make magic work with technology. Ves had to wear two hats at once in order to figure out the means for one to influence the other.

Still, Ves already made some strides in this new and uncharted territory by figuring out how to grant exclusive control over the tail of the Devil Tiger to the design spirit.

While he wasn't sure whether it was a good idea to give Zeigra direct control over one of the aspects of his mech, the tail was one of the least consequential limbs of his mech.

Whether all of this worked as intended remained to be seen. Ves would only be able to find out once he finally fabricated the mech, which was a challenge in itself.

"I need a secure and private mech workshop to put this mech together!"

He already had some plans in mind for that.

"I'll be picking up the final batch of materials as well as Gloriana's pure ASMAS shipment in my next stop. Once I've gathered all of the materials, I can begin to find a suitable workshop."

As for finding a workshop, there were plenty of underground workshops and manufacturing facilities on major manufacturing planets. Trying to rent a reliable one that wouldn't screw him over was his biggest concern, but Ves was confident he could navigate the murky swamp.

The next point of difficulty was trying to sell his mech. Previously, Ves considered entering the outskirts of the Nyxian Gap in order to pass off his Devil Tiger somewhere, but this was exceedingly risky.

"It will be a lot more convenient for me if I can sell my mech through the Circle of Mota!"

Ves initially knew little about this mysterious organization, but Crindon managed to collect some scraps of information on them. The Circle of Mota mainly served as a trading channel between Sentinels and Nyxians.

Because such trade was very illegal and highly controversial within the Sentinel Kingdom, every transaction occurred with the highest level of privacy possible. The Circle developed several traditions that made it harder to track the buyers and sellers of the illicit goods between trading through the Circle's marketplaces.

Considering the special nature of the Devil Tiger, Ves knew he would never be able to sell the mech at a profit. The cost of its pure ASMAS alone was enough to bankrupt the LMC! How could Ves possibly expect to sell his mech at such an exorbitant price to the ruthless but shabby pirates that inhabited the Nyxian Gap?

It was likely that Ves would have to share his mech at an enormous loss, but he never intended to profit from its sale in the first place. The techniques he invented, the lessons he learned and the solutions he developed represented his real gains. As for the money? That came extra.

Even so, if he ended up selling his Devil Tiger for just 30 million bright credits or so, there was no way he'd end up satisfied!

"I have to do my best to sell my mech at a fair price!"

From the stories that Crindon collected about the Circle of Mota, Ves knew that the underground organization offered various avenues for him to get what he wanted.

First, a lot of goods offered by the Nyxian pirates consisted of unknown exotics and strange curiosities. Even the best appraisers in the employ of the Circle of Mota struggled to estimate the value of these prices.

Due to their uncertain value and applications, these goods tended to pile up in warehouses as their demand was nonexistent.

"I can obtain a lot of strange exotics in exchange for my mech!"

While Ves wouldn't know if he got the better of such a transaction or not, there were a lot of uses to expanding his collection of exotics. Even if none of them reacted to spirituality or contained any useful traits, he might still be able to find a use for them in his future mech designs.

"Every successful mech designer builds up a collection of exotics for this reason."

The other, more uncertain alternative would be to submit his mech to the auctions that the Circle regularly organized.

Ves pursed his lips at the thought. "Mechs like the Devil Tiger are often sold in auctions."

The idea intrigued him, but who knew if anyone would recognize the actual worth of his mech? What if the bidders in the auction only possessed a paltry amount of money?

"Will the Circle even allow me to submit my mech for auction?" He wondered.

Auctions only accepted the submission of great and unique mechs. It was meaningless to auction bog-standard mechs that could easily be bought through other channels.

Considering all of the features as well as the overall performance of his Devil Tiger, Ves was quite certain that the Circle would love to put it on auction!

However, if Ves ever exposed the Devil Tiger to so many auction goers, then he'd have to be really careful not to leave any clues behind that exposed his hand in its design!

This was difficult!

Ves had already taken a lot of precautions. For example, one of the reasons why he waited to pick up the shipment of pure ASMAS was because he wanted to obtain it in a secure and anonymous fashion from a Shadow Courier.

"With how much Gloriana paid to the Shadow Couriers, they better keep their mouths shut." He muttered.

While Ves was confident he could hide the collection of materials and obscure the fabrication process, all of that would be moot if his Devil Tiger radiated a similar aura to that of his other mech designs!

"I have to find a way to suppress this effect!"

This was the final headache he faced before he completed his design. Normally, Ves did everything he could to maximize the external influence of his mechs. The more impressive their auras, the greater their ability to influence allies and enemies alike! This was one of the core strengths of his products!

"How can I go against my instinct and suppress my Devil Tiger's aura?" Ves frowned.

Chapter 1428 Aura Manipulation

How could Ves design a mech that advanced his design principles without tying it back to his identity?

"The Devil Tiger is way too controversial. I can't allow it to taint my reputation." He grumbled.

He already switched up his distinctive design style in many ways to obscure his fingerprints on the Devil Tiger's design. Ves never designed a bestial mech before, which made it easy for him to disassociate himself from the Devil Tiger design.

While Ves could employ all manner of technical tricks to erase the similarities between his public designs and his Devil Tiger design, the one area which he couldn't erase was his specialty.

The X-Factor of his mech was certainly going to be very strong. Ves knew that for certain. If the effect only applied to the mech pilot, then that was okay, because the chances of exposure were miniscule in that case.

However, one of the distinctive features about his mechs was that as their X-Factor increased, their auras became more noticeable as well! They became especially perceivable on any mech that Ves crafted by hand, as in the case of his gold label mechs and custom mechs!

"Should I deliberately weaken the X-Factor of my Devil Tiger?" He wondered.

He quickly shook his head. His pride as a mech designer would never allow him to sabotage his efforts for such an inane reason! Though he was afraid of exposing himself, he detested crippling a mech that had the potential to be something great!

"There is no way I'll allow my Devil Tiger to be born in a stunted state! I just can't!"

Ves had become way too invested in this project to dial his efforts back. Nothing compelled him to go this far for what he considered to be an experiment. He did not expect to gain any recognition or material rewards either.

He simply wanted to design a mech that surpassed his previous efforts.

"In many of my mech designs, I have to restrain myself. I have to abide by the rules. The demands of my customers rank first. Yet that can get tiresome at times."

Working on the Devil Tiger design challenged him enormously, he also felt liberated. The design project reinvigorated his love for mech design. Creation was boundless and limitless. A mech designer like Ves would only stagnate if he kept to just a narrow slice of possible mech designs.

Due to this, Ves initially resisted attempts to restrain the strengths of his mech design.

However, as he thought about it more, he considered it to be an interesting exercise. This might not be the only time he wanted to restrain the outward expression of the X-Factor of his mechs.

When Ves thought about the problem, he recalled a distinct phenomenon concerning the mechanics behind auras.

"When multiple identical mechs are standing side by side, their auras overlap with each other."

In fact, they didn't just overlap, but they also synced with each other! This caused them to merge their strengths and amplify their effects to observers!

If auras could be layered on top of each other to amplify their effects, what if they could dampen each other instead?

"Interesting." Ves rubbed his chin in an intrigued manner. "However, this can only be done if I have at least two mechs. If there's only one source of aura, I don't have anything to dampen it with, unless..."

What if he split Zeigra's spirituality in two? Then put them both into the Devil Tiger? Could a mech design accommodate two identical but separated design spirits?

The idea tempted him a lot, yet it sounded way too crazy even for Ves! The risks involved with splitting a spiritual entity into two was way too reckless! He could hardly predict what might result if he attempted such a radical act!

"The entire point of the Devil Tiger is to see how it will function with a complete spiritual entity! If I split them up into two super-sized spiritual fragments, the entire nature of my experiment is different!"

Besides, Ves doubted he could arrange the two spiritual fragments together in a way that caused them to completely negate each other's auras.

He had to find a different approach. As he mulled over the issue, he came up with another simple idea.

"What if the X-Factor of my mech is expressed inward rather outward? Is it possible to tweak this aspect?"

He had never consciously tweaked the parameters of the X-Factor, mostly because he never imagined he could manipulate it directly.

In all of his previous works, the X-Factor always came about indirectly. One source was the focused emotional and spiritual investment he put into his designs. Another source was the design spirit he placed into his designs.

The latter had stolen the show the last few years. As an external source of strength, the use of design spirits vastly strengthened the X-Factor of his mech designs.

"Yet underneath my shiny design spirits rests a bedrock of subliminal spirituality that serves as the spiritual foundations of my mech designs!"

This was something that he could influence directly. While it was ordinarily too weak to affect the strength of a design spirit, what if he strengthened it to a degree that it could?

"It's worth a try!"

Of course, his enthusiasm quickly subsided when he thought about how much spiritual energy he had to invest to negate Zeigra's aura. If he tried to dampen it directly, then the amount of energy he had to expend would likely suck him dry!

"I have to resort to a different approach!"

Dozens of theories flitted past his mind as he tried to come up with a novel approach that produced his desired result with as little sacrifice as possible.

Yes eventually palmed his head. "Why am I thinking of dampening when I can just block it instead? What if I can shape the spiritual aspects I'm in control of into a container that blocks any aura from radiating outwards?"

It was kind of like treating his mech as a source of radiation. If he wanted to contain the radiation and protect the outside environment from becoming exposed, then he could simply build some kind of barrier that expressly disallowed its passage!

The key was that this barrier did not have to be too strong or fancy! It just had to be strong enough to contain the aura of the X-Factor of his mech!

"Aura is a byproduct of the strength of the X-Factor. It's not really all that strong on its own!" Ves realized. "I can use this property to develop an efficient barrier!"

He invested all of his mental processing power to this solution. He called up a projection of his largely-complete mech design and injected it with some of his spiritual energy in a specific fashion. He formed an intangible, conceptual barrier along the outer contours of his design.

Ves used his imagination to instill his spiritual barrier with a specific instruction. It's only goal was to prevent the Devil Tiger's aura from escaping from the mech!

He contemplated adding more instructions, but he was afraid of screwing up his original intentions.

As soon as the barrier took effect, Ves immediately perceived the difference. The Devil Tiger design no longer appeared to radiate anything remarkable! Ves found his design to be a lot duller now that he could no longer perceive its residual aura!

"I'm on the right track!"

Of course, his thin and weak spiritual barrier only blocked the Devil Tiger's inherent aura. Ves still hadn't instilled it with a design spirit.

"It's about time, though."

Solving this final problem meant that Ves overcame the final hurdle that prevented him from finalizing his design.

While he felt rather cross that he couldn't test his design with a prototype, he thought he did a pretty good job regardless. In any case, since his design philosophy mainly affected people rather than technology, Ves never suffered from a huge divergence in simulated tests and realspace tests.

Ves took a mental step back and evaluated his work up to now. After several weeks of intensive design work, his mech looked as formidable as he envisioned.

The mech's overall appearance bore a vague resemblance to Zeigra, though he opted to dye the mech in a deeper, darker and more striking shade of red. Black stripes interspersed across its exterior added a menacing tiger-like quality to the mech.

In order to make its name even clearer, Ves also stamped a small but noticeable label of its name onto its flank. This way, no one would mistake its actual name!

While its cost was way way higher than its actual performance, the Devil Tiger was no slouch. Among third-class mechs, its performance equaled that of an expensive custom mech like Lord Javier's Loquacious Raphael.

"It's more accurate to describe the Devil Tiger as a mech that straddles the zone between second-class and third-class mechs!"

With ASMAS at its core, his mech had the potential to complete its step into second-class mechs. The only issue was that his mech would have to consume a lot of expensive materials and upgrade all of the third-class components that the mech wasn't able to upgrade on its own.

"Human intervention is still required for some of the upgrade and repair processes." Ves grumbled.

Smart metal in the form of pure ASMAS and substitute ASMAS comprised about seventy-five percent of his mech design. While this was a very high proportion, the twenty percent that consisted of regular mech parts still required human attention in order to repair them or upgrade them with better parts.

The configuration that this proportion resulted was a mech that excelled in landbound skirmishes. Its endurance was quite decent, though its pure ASMAS expended a considerable amount of energy and spare materials each time it produced a new batch of substitute ASMAS to repair its losses.

Still, it was better for the mech to perform its own repairs than to let enslaved or ill-educated pirates tool around the guts of his mech! Ves had already programmed his mech with various nasty responses if anyone incompetent tried to screw around with his machine!

As Ves evaluated his mech for one last time, he picked up Lucky who was lounging next to his P-stone and showed off his design.

"Look at this design. Isn't it a beauty?"

"Meow."

"Don't you wish you'd be as huge, dangerous and menacing as my Devil Tiger?"

"Meow!"

"Size matters, Lucky!"

"Meow meow!"

Lucky angrily phased out of Ves' arms and floated out of reach. Who claimed bigger cats were better?! A gem cat like him was perfect for cuddling and sneaking!

Once he finished chuckling, Ves grew solemn. It was time for him to finalize his design by adding its final, special touch. He picked up his P-stone and inspected its intangible prisoner.

Zeigra's spirituality still hadn't let up on its animosity towards Ves. The deceased Crown Cat wanted nothing more than to hit back at Ves in retribution for the hunt!

"Your struggles are pointless, you loser cat! Behave for a moment and accept your new home! It will be the only safe harbor you'll enjoy!"

Ves mustered up his Spirituality and dragged Zeigra's spirituality out of the P-stone long enough to immediately shove it into the conceptual space of the Devil Tiger.

A transformation occurred!

While the aura barrier that Ves formed around the Devil Tiger successfully blocked his design from radiating a distinctive aura, it wasn't perfect. The mech still took on a very subtle quality that hinted at something more beneath the surface!

Ves immediately had the feeling that he created something special.

All of the risks he had taken and all of the time and resources he invested into its design resulted in a mech design with limitless growth opportunities.

As long as his Devil Tiger evaded total destruction, then it possessed the potential to grow into a truly formidable mech!

His design seed seethed with excitement. Even it acknowledged that Ves had created something exceptional!

"My Devil Tiger design is complete!"

Now, all he had to do was to produce its only copy!

Chapter 1429 Commanding Attention

Ves admired his finished mech design from multiple angles. He noted that forming a barrier to contain the aura that resulted from its strong X-Factor did not magically make the aura disappear.

As Ves examined the interaction closer with his spiritual senses, he realized that as the aura found no outlet to escape outward, it instead sank into the interior of his mech design!

This resulted in a strange effect that gave the Devil Tiger design a very strange and subtle quality.

"The Devil Tiger doesn't feel like my regular mech designs, which is what I wanted, but..."

It was as if his mech glowed in a different way. Instead of radiating a clear aura, it started to emanate a hidden pressure that made him doubt the wisdom of what he did. He had the feeling that percolating his mech with its own aura all the time might lead to unpredictable results!

Instead of worrying about it, he actually looked forward to what this might result!

"Hahahaha! I hope you won't succumb too soon!"

This alternate expression of aura served as a way to disassociate himself from his creation. Although both expressions shared a couple of similarities, the inward expression of aura was a lot less blatant about drawing attention to itself.

"There's enough differences to establish plausible deniability. That should be sufficient." Ves nodded in satisfaction.

The only other concern he held was the lack of restraints keeping Zeigra's spirituality in place.

Unlike the P-stones, his mech designs did not possess a powerful attracting force on spiritual entities.

This basically meant that Zeigra's spirituality was free to stay or leave as it desired!

Of course, when Zeigra realized this soon after inhabiting the mental space of Devil Tiger design, he immediately tested the waters outside his open cage.

As soon as Zeigra made his escape, his spirituality immediately began to deteriorate!

In fact, its existing wounds along with the gaping hole from the time Ves carved out a fragment accelerated the breakup process!

There were no other places that could shelter Zeigra's spirituality except for the P-stone that it had just left.

There was no way Zeigra wanted to return to its former prison! At the very least, his new home presented him with the hope of escaping in the future! He just had to bide his time for an opportunity to hop to a better home!

Ves grinned. He sensed Zeigra's thoughts and knew that there was a risk that the Crown Cat's spirituality wanted to leave.

However, Ves believed that Zeigra would gradually become used to the Devil Tiger. The mech possessed a high growth potential that wasn't any inferior to that of the Crown Cat's original body!

He actually considered the Devil Tiger to be a much more effective prison than his P-stone!

"The best prisons aren't the ones with the thickest walls, but the ones whose inmates want to stay!"

Now that he finally completed the Devil Tiger design and confirmed that Zeigra had nowhere else to go for the time being, Ves switched off the projection and deactivated all of the jammers and security precautions in his stateroom.

As soon as he reconnected to the rest of the galaxy, Gavin immediately entered his stateroom with a concerned expression.

"Are you finally done with your work?"

Ves nodded. "Yeah. I'm done tinkering. Sorry for being so rude, but I can't control the onset of inspiration and creative moods. Creative and passionate states of mind are very valuable to me. All of my best works came about with inspiration."

"I know, boss. You've told me that before. I know how you tend to be when you are completely taken in by your work. I just want to suggest you ought to find a balance. You can't just isolate yourself in your room for weeks or months on end. It was much better when you worked with Ketis, because at least you were forced to come out of shell. Now that you're back to working alone, you've regressed."

"You have a point."

Though he recognized Gavin's concerns, Ves wasn't apologetic at all. He considered upending his schedule a small price to pay to rush his mech design to completion.

"Right now, our fleet is orbiting Reinz I for a while. We originally scheduled appointments with two Journeyman Mech Designers who reside on the industrial planet."

"Have you successfully rescheduled those appointments?"

"Surprisingly, the Journeymen expressed a lot of understanding for our request to postpone the appointments." Gavin replied in a puzzled manner. "I don't know what's up, but their secretaries have been very accommodating to us. They've basically told us that you're welcome to drop by their headquarters whenever it's convenient!"

"Sounds like my reputation has already spread! Haha!"

He knew that taking part in the Crown Hunt had been worth it in the end. Though the commoners outside of Felixia didn't pay much attention to this blip in the news, those in the know were aware of its true significance.

By participating in one of the Sentinel Kingdom's celebrated hunting traditions, Ves had made a lot of inroads in the local power structure. His acquaintance with Lady Miralix meant he also enjoyed a measure of native noble support, which further enhanced his standing in the state.

Once Ves got up to speed with what he missed, he immediately proceeded to get down to the surface of Reinz I. As he emerged from the armored shuttle surrounded by the mechs of the Battle Criers, he decided to wear his overcoat over his normal business attire.

The addition of this single article of clothing made a huge difference to his stature!

Every employee of the headquarters immediately felt or noticed his ostentatious presence. The living spiritual fragment locked within the overcoat emanated an aura of both menace and pride!

The effect it had on the receptionists, the security guards and everyone else within sight caused them to feel suppressed and compelled to show their respect to Ves!

While Ves found this reaction to be exceedingly interesting, he became a bit annoyed at how strong his overcoat affected the moods and emotions of other people. At this rate, the Planetary Guard would probably arrest him on suspicion of brainwashing everyone in the vicinity!

He needed to modulate the strength of his overcoat's aura. When Ves thought about the problem, he realized he already developed a solution!

As he and his followers stepped in the elevator that brought them to the top of the headquarters, he quietly went to work. He expended a small portion of his spiritual energy to form a weaker but otherwise identical barrier to the one that encompassed his Devil Tiger design.

Once he stabilized the barrier, he gently enveloped his overcoat with it, making sure to cover both the exterior and the interior portion of his garment.

The tense shoulders of Gavin and Nitaa immediately relaxed a bit as the tenseness in the air immediately subsided by half!

"That's better!" Gavin sighed. "Was that you're doing, boss?"

"Yup. What do you think?"

"It's a lot less threatening. It's less of a punch in the face and more of a slap in the face. You still look like you demand attention, but it's not as forceful as before."

Ves nodded in satisfaction. "That's the effect I was going for. What do you think, Lucky?"

"Meow."

His cat arrogantly perched on his shoulder as if it enjoyed sitting atop a Crown Cat!

Now that Ves had taken Zeigra out of the P-stone and placed him into an intangible design, Lucky could no longer bully the captive spiritual entity as easily as before.

The only way for the gem cat to establish his dominance over the Crown Cat was to mess with the Pride of Dusk!

"Don't you dare scratch my coat!"

"Meow!"

"I'm serious!"

Soon enough, the elevator reached the top floor. After leaving Gavin and Nitaa behind at the security checkpoint, Ves passed through the entrance of the office and met with the first mech designer he wanted to meet today.

As soon as Ves stepped foot into the office, the dynamics within the room immediately reversed. Ves subtly weakened the barrier filtering some of the aura his overcoat emanated, and the effect became palpable.

The man sitting behind his desk on the opposite side of the room immediately stood up in respect.

"Mr. Larkinson! Welcome to my headquarters! I have looked forward to your visit for a long time! I'm honored you've decided to meet me first!"

Ves calmly stepped forward and stretched out his arm to shake the other Journeyman's hand. As the distance closed, his counterpart experienced an increasing amount of pressure!

"Thank you, Mr. Pelle. I hope I haven't troubled you with the changes in my schedule."

"Oh, not at all! There is nothing else on my agenda that demands my attention, so it is no issue for me to meet you at this time."

Marcus Pelle was a local Sentinel Journeyman who hadn't come to success on his own. While he showed some promise when he graduated from a technical university, the man lacked the capital and connections to start his own mech company.

It was only when one of the local noble houses in the Reinz System recognized his capabilities and invested in him that Pelle propelled his way into success. He even managed to advance to Journeyman a few years ago when he reached thirty-five years old.

While the mech industry did not consider anyone who advanced to Journeyman at that age to be remarkable, it still served as proof that Pelle possessed the drive and competence to reach greater heights!

Within the mech community, Marcus Pelle's age, experience and abundant portfolio put him in a senior position over Ves. Yet as the small talk proceeded, the Sentinel mech designer did not put on any airs and instead gave ground to his guest!

Ves knew that Pelle's unusually accommodating attitude came from the intimidation effect of his coat as well as his recent bump in reputation. Considering the man's close ties to a noble house, the man was especially sensitive to noble associations!

While Ves enjoyed establishing his superiority over Pelle, he quickly reined in this vain desire.

If he started to revel in this act, then it might come back to bite him in the future!

Relying on fear and intimidation to coerce others into cooperating with him would only breed more hostility!

Therefore, as much as Ves wanted to indulge in his macho desire to put himself on top of others, he consciously tweaked the filtration barrier that enveloped his coat to reduce the effect of its aura to a point where it faded into the background.

The shift happened so discreetly that Marcus Pelle hardly noticed the air between them lightening up. While the man grew a bit more comfortable with his guest, he still maintained some guardedness.

"Let's move on to the exchange, shall we?" Pelle suggested.

"You first."

Generally, Ves liked it when others went first. He could gauge the sincerity and the willingness of the other party to conduct an honest exchange by the opening they delivered.

Those who wanted to conduct a sincere exchange were fairly liberal in what they revealed. In contrast, those who wanted to hoard their secrets spent much of their time on vague descriptions and worthless anecdotes.

Considering the circumstances, Marcus Pelle did not dare to mess around!

"Are you aware of my design philosophy?"

"Yes." Ves nodded. "According to your record, you specialize in designing spaceborn mechs that are suited for extensive deployments. Your products are famous in Sentinel for being able to operate in space for weeks!"

Marcus smiled. "That claim is already outdated. My latest mech design is able to operate continuously in space for more than a month!"

"That's very impressive!"

Was it unique to design a mech that could operate for months at a time in deep space? Not really.

However, those who wanted to design such mechs had to make a lot of considerations that other mech designers never thought about. One of the most prevalent problems that occurred when mech pilots were deployed in the cold of space for so long was that they tended to become unstable!

What Marcus Pelle actually specialized in was designing mechs that mech pilots didn't mind piloting for weeks at a time!

Ves saw a lot of similarities in their priorities, hence why he became eager to exchange with this Sentinel Mech Designer!

Chapter 1430 Gaping Void

Marcus Pelle began to explain the rationale of his design philosophy.

"One of the biggest threats plaguing the Sentinel Kingdom is the pirates spilling out of the Nyxian Gap. As you have probably heard by now, the Nyxian Gap is not a normal region of space. Unlike regular space which

consists of empty space interspersed with star systems that consist of one or multiple suns orbited by varying amounts of planets, it almost entirely consists of an endless field of asteroids!\\"

The amount of asteroids floating within the Nyxian Gap defied natural law. Some very strange anomalous effects caused a huge region of space within the Komodo Star Sector and its neighboring star sectors to host a seemingly-endless sea of rocks, most of which consisted of worthless materials.

However, the Nyxian Gap also represented a source of wealth. Some of the rocks floating in the Nyxian Gap contained scraps of exotics of varying rarity and value. Low-grade and medium-grade exotics were fairly prevalent in the finds that prospectors uncovered, but sometimes they hit the jackpot by uncovering a small deposit of high-grade exotics!

The wealth buried within the Nyxian Gap attracted the greed of every state that surrounded the hazardous region. Despite the pirates and other scum infesting the area, the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association continually dispatched outfits and expeditions to the mineral-rich portions of the Gap in order to prospect for exotics.

The Sentinel Kingdom's territories weren't all that remarkable. The reason why the Kingdom grew so impressively to the point where it became the strongest third-rate state in the star sector was because of how much wealth they extracted from the Nyxian Gap!

Due to the Sentinel Kingdom's preoccupation with the Nyxian Gap, their mech culture distinctly placed a lot of emphasis on spaceborn mechs.

That did not mean that the Sentinel Kingdom saw no use in landbound mechs. Notable mech pilots like Lady Miralix still had plenty of fighting in store if they deployed to the Nyxian Gap.

Anomalous heavy gravity planets such as Mournshell attracted a lot of landbound mechs, while many moon-sized asteroids transformed into secret pirate settlements sometimes required boots on the ground as well.

Still, most battles still took place in space in the Nyxian Gap. Due to the complex environment within this area, the Peacekeeper outfits sometimes develop unusual demands.

"There are many uses for mechs that can operate continuously within the Nyxian Gap." Marcus Pelle elaborated. "One of the biggest problems with the Nyxian Gap is that FTL drives are completely useless in this region aside from a few exceptions. Fleets have to navigate perilous routes, surrounded by asteroids in every direction, in order to reach their destination. Such journeys can last for months or even years."

Ves idly rubbed Lucky behind his ears. "Since a lot of time is invested in these journeys, the expeditions have to be sure they reach their intended destinations!"

"Exactly! Navigation is very difficult in many portions of the Nyxian Gap. Asteroids are constantly spinning and colliding everywhere, thereby scrambling navigational markers that help both Peacekeepers and pirates from figuring out their positions within this territory. My mechs are often deployed as part of long-range reconnaissance units. They're sent in different directions in order to figure out which direction leads them to their intended destination."

Ves could hardly fathom how these outfits and expeditions kept track of the mechs they sent out. Navigation within the Nyxian Gap was so difficult that every outfit that operated in the region depended on the services of specialized navigators!

"You're not the only one who designs long deployment spaceborn mechs, right?"

"Correct. There are a number of mech designers from Sentinel and other states with an interest in the Nyxian Gap who compete in this market."

"What separates your products from your competitors?"

"Well, aside from the high energy efficiency and various power-saving settings of my designs, I've invested a lot in developing methods to maintain the mental health of my customers. It's something that none of my competitors has paid as much attention to than me. Mental health isn't something that ordinarily comes to mind when mech designers embark on a new mech design."

In other words, Marcus Pelle's actual specialty largely encompassed the field of psychology and other fields related to the human condition!

Both Ves and Pelle developed pilot-centric design philosophies, which caused them to share some kinship with each other.

Just as with Ves, Pelle's mech designs didn't feature the greatest and most efficient performance. Nethertheless, the high regard of its customers caused his products to develop a modest but very devoted fanbase!

"I take it that your specialization goes beyond loading up the data banks of your mechs with games and drama series."

Pelle nodded. "Isolation breeds lots of problems. Outfits try their best to mitigate this problem by sending out multiple mechs on reconnaissance missions at a time, but this is fairly costly and not very efficient. Carrier vessels can only bring so many mechs, and they constantly require protection wherever they find themselves. Not a single region in the Nyxian Gap is devoid of pirates!"

"Except for the outposts, right?" Ves asked.

"Even the outposts aren't completely safe." The Sentinel mech designer shook his head. "Whenever they get too big or attract too much traffic, the Nyxian pirate gangs tend to gather together and launch a massive assault! Even if the Peacekeepers have placed a lot of defenses at these sites, the Nyxian pirates can't tolerate the presence of any lawful settlement in their playground!"

They quickly went back to the main topic.

"Even pairing mech pilots up isn't enough to stave off isolation, right?"

"Correct, Mr. Larkinson. Even if you are grouped up with your closest comrades, my research indicates that there are instances where colleagues can grow estranged from each other. The Nyxian Gap is a very strange space, and while I haven't been able to gather any proof that it agitates them in any measurable way, the strange conditions already exert their own form of pressure!"

In other words, the unknown and uncomfortable space environment was so weird from the regular, orderly universe that mech pilots started to believe they were stuck in a dark, endless hole where no respite could be found within several light-years!

In fact, the stories that Ves heard about mech pilots going crazy in the Nyxian Gap were so prevalent that he started to suspect that there might be a spiritual effect at work!

Sadly, the only way to verify his guess was to step foot in the Nyxian Gap himself, which he really wanted to avoid at this stage.

"So how do you best stave off the negative effects of isolation?"

The question pointed straight at Marcus Pelle's core specialty. He paused for a moment as if to contemplate how much he wanted to reveal.

Eventually, he gave out one useful nugget of information.

"One of the most obvious ways to defeat isolation is to make mech pilots feel they aren't alone."

The answer sounded simple, but Ves sensed the depth in those words. "Even when they are deployed on their own for weeks at a time?"

"Even then, there are ways to make mech pilots experience a connection with the wider galaxy despite lacking any connection to their ships or the galactic net. Before I came around, the most predominant solution to this problem is to drug the mech pilots with stimulants that suppressed their fears and prevented their moods from sliding."

"I've heard about that. They're quite effective, right?"

"That's true. A lot of Peacekeepers have relied on these drugs to mitigate the destructive effects of isolation. However, I don't consider any of those drugs to be perfect. Each drug affects more than just the fears that emerge from enduring isolation."

"What's so bad about that?"

"The skill, attentiveness, motivation and judgement of the mech are depressed as well when taking these drugs. While they might not necessarily have a severe effect on hardened and experienced mech pilots, their performance drops are very significant. I believe there are better solutions to stave off isolation than drugging our mech pilots stupid!"

Ves agreed with such a sentiment. As someone who dealt with several addicts in his life, he knew that a reliance on drugs and stimulants often led to severe or outright destructive repercussions.

"What is your alternative to drugs?" He pressed, eager to hear the solution that Marcus Pelle came up with as his specialty.

"Surrealism."

"..Pardon?"

"Surrealism." Pelle repeated. "It's a simplistic description of what I do, but it succinctly describes one of the earlier methods I came up with to keep mech pilots active and engaged in their mission."

Ves wanted to stop petting Lucky in order to rub his ears. Did he hear correctly? Had he mistakingly entered into an exchange with a graphical artist rather than a mech designer?

"Of all the possible answers I expected, I never imagined you'd come up with this." Ves said mildly. After so many instances where he confounded other mech designers, this time it was his turn to be perplexed! "What is so surreal about your products?"

Pelle smiled at Ves. "I've altered the sensory perception of my mechs. There are many ways to process and translate sensory data in ways that allow mech pilots to interpret them through the man-machine connection. What I've done is to add a mode to the sensors of my design that alters some of their parameters when the mechs are continuously deployed."

Ves frowned at this response. "So.. if I understand this right, instead of depending on stimulants, you instead mess with the sensors of your mechs in order to simulate some of their effects?"

"Somewhat." The Sentinel mech designer shrugged. "It's anything but a perfect solution, but the results I've achieved are surprisingly effective. I've learned much about how mech pilots think and how their moods change as a result of specific external stimuli."

"It still sounds weird for me. Are you projecting eyeballs onto the surfaces of asteroids or something?"

"Heavens, no! You can't just mess with the perception of mech pilots with such disturbing images!"

"So this method can easily backfire and go awry."

"Right. Frankly, this method is very dangerous and can easily lead to the deaths of your customers. That's why I don't recommend you utilize this method yourself."

Pelle spent some time to warn Ves of the many possible repercussions if he attempted to imitate this method without a foundation in the underlying theories.

Ves sensed the seriousness in his counterpart's warnings. "You've been very clear about the dangers inherent with messing with the sensory perception of mech pilots. Why do it in the first place, then? What is the point of this method?"

"The simple explanation is.. it serves as a distraction. Space is monotonous. While boredom can be staved by serving up entertainment to mech pilots, that will almost always result in a massive reduction in situational awareness."

"Distracted mech pilots are easy marks for pirates."

"Exactly. In addition, not every mech pilot derives enjoyment from such static entertainment. The sense of isolation can creep up at them regardless if they immerse themselves in virtual simulations. All of it is fake."

"Isn't surrealism fake as well?"

"Ah, but that's the strength of this method." Pelle grinned. "You see, the surrealism that I've resorted to is all real!"

"All real?" Ves couldn't resist scratching his head this time. "So if I understand this right, the illusions you serve up to your mech pilots reflect reality?"

"Indeed. If you place a red filter in front of your eyes, your vision will turn red. Does that mean the reality you perceive is any less true?"

Ves frowned. "I'd say that my perception is distorted in that case."

"What is truth and what is false? What is illusion and what is reality? I think that absolute truth doesn't exist, and that reality can never be perceived in an unbiased perspective. There is always a form of distortion at work no matter how precise and how accurate a sensor claims to perceive and measure reality!"