

Chapter 1431 Paying Test Subjects

What was real, and what was fake?

To Marcus Pelle, the difference was a matter of perspective.

Perhaps one person found an imitation mech that precisely copied an authentic mech design to be real, while others insisted that it would always remain a fake.

A lot of arguments could be made about what was fake and what was real, but Pelle did not stop at this point. Instead, he took a step further and came up with a surprising principle.

"If what is real and what is fake is in question, why not play around with this ambiguity?"

This was where Pelle's interpretation of surrealism came into play. The mech designer manipulated the sensors of his mechs into blended truths and untruths, thereby causing mech pilots on long deployment to become plagued by strange sensory outputs.

This wasn't as straightforward as turning every asteroid into a floating dog or something. Instead, Pelle tweaked the sensors and the filters in a way that caused them to transfer more junk data to the minds of the mech pilot.

Garbage that ordinarily got filtered out before they transferred through the neural interface essentially got a free pass, though still within reasonable limits that prevented mech pilots from getting overloaded.

The result was that mech pilots would become subject to strange but fascinating illusions.

Perhaps one minute the environment looked blue-shifted all of a sudden. In the next minute they perceived the smell of rotten eggs from a distant starship. After that they spot something ridiculously funny from a distant glow!

"What is the point of messing with the perception of mech pilots to this extent?" Ves frowned as he repeated his question.

"The goal is to stave off the creeping sense of boredom and isolation without causing mech pilots to lose situational awareness. It may surprise you to hear this, but my solution has actually turned out to be effective. Instead of becoming distracted by watching irrelevant action dramas, they instead place their attention more fully on the environment for many hours at a time!"

The theories Marcus Pelle developed relied on very strange assumptions. Ves found it difficult to follow the other mech designer's train of thought.

He understood some of the gist of it, but his perspective on mech design simply diverged too much from that of Pelle's to accept what he heard.

In the end, his gains from this exchange did not amount to much. Ves did develop some interesting insights about the nature of truth and falsehood and how it could be manipulated to achieve certain goals.

When he thought about it, Ves already engaged in something similar by turning the imaginary into reality.

The images he created into mind became capable of affecting reality when infused with spiritual energy.

The mechs he designed influenced the mentalities of both mech pilots and observers through unusual means.

Ves always had the sense that anything pertaining to spirituality possessed both a real and imaginary quality. It followed fewer rules than more mundane forms of matter and energy. As long as someone grew strong enough, they became capable of breaking more and more rules, allowing them to achieve a myriad of extraordinary feats!

During the meeting, Marcus Pelle successfully managed to claw back some of the initiative he lost, but Ves didn't mind. Though Pelle probably believed he successfully confused Ves by babbling on about surrealism, the man had no idea what kind of help he'd been!

As Ves finally departed Pelle's headquarters, he entered in a thoughtful mood. As his armored shuttle took off to his other appointment for the day, he reflected on his understanding of his spiritual techniques.

"Pelle and I both have something in common."

They both manipulated their mech pilots with elements of fantasy. While Pelle resorted to technological means by messing with the sensors of his mechs, Ves utilized spiritual means to manipulate the interaction between mech pilots and their mechs.

The comparison made him feel a little uncomfortable, because how far was he allowed to go before he crossed a line?

His recent actions, such as intimidating Marcus Pelle with his overcoat and developing a radical mech like the Devil Tiger, both pushed his manipulation abilities to a new extreme.

In both instances, Ves got caught up with the rush of possibilities that opened up when he utilized his new spiritual techniques.

"Just because I can, doesn't mean I should." He whispered to himself.

Ves recognized he'd been indulging himself a little too much. The temptations of the path of life lured him into a direction that compelled him to perform increasingly more radical actions!

The unusual and frankly unethical methods that Marcus Pelle developed in order to keep the users of his mechs awake and alert repelled Ves to an extent.

Mech pilots didn't get the full story and were subjected to strange surreal illusions without their consent or control. It reminded Ves to how neural interface specialists such as Old Man Terrence surreptitiously manipulated the neural interfaces of his mechs.

In all of these cases, the mech designers all treated their customers as test subjects!

"Maybe this perspective is much more widespread than I initially thought." Ves mused.

In most cases, the mech designers harbored good intentions, but that did not necessarily make it right.

His Devil Tiger project especially crossed a lot of lines he really shouldn't. It was fine though, since it was just a one-off experiment. He would never dare to introduce such enormous dangers to his commercial mechs!

"Not all mech pilots are my test subjects! Only some of them are!"

A temptation always existed to push the boundaries with every mech he designed. With how frequently he came up with innovative new techniques, he always had to try his best not to get caught up too much in his excitement.

Admittedly, this was a lot harder than he thought sometimes. He always believed his new inventions worked and hated the thought of restraining himself due to an abundance of caution.

Ves always thrived by pursuing his passions! Yet surrendering to them also made him prone to warping his judgement! The ideas he came up with sounded very frightening to him when he recalled them afterwards!

In cases like these, Gavin's recent words reminded him of a solution against this judgement problem.

"I should stop designing mechs alone." He muttered.

He remembered the times he designed his mech alongside the likes of Professor Ventag and Ketis. Each time they discussed their collaborative works, they constantly conducted small professional exchanges as they shared some of their own insights and perspectives.

Ves also had to rein himself in and ground himself to reality each time he wanted to explain or justify his design choices.

He sighed. "When I get home, I should really intensify my efforts to expand my design team."

In the following hour, he met up with another Journeyman on Reinz I. Sadly, Ves gained much less out of this exchange. Their design philosophies diverged even further than he expected.

Nonetheless, Ves was already happy with his gains from his first exchange, so he didn't mind his lack of results this time.

In any case, he became more practised with manipulating the aura of the Pride of Dusk's overcoat. It hardly took any effort for him to dial its intimidation effect up or down.

He also managed to find a sweet spot that lowered the intensity of its aura to the level where he commanded respect without arousing too much fear and suspicion.

"Let's leave this boring planet and be on our way to our next destination."
Ves spoke at the end of the day.

Once he and his escort returned to their ships, the fleet quickly entered FTL travel and headed to a special destination.

This time, the fleet headed to one of the port systems of the Sentinel Kingdom!

Just like the Bentheim System, the Cinach System served as a major trade nexus in the surrounding region. A lot of visitors and trade goods passed through Cinach, causing a wealth of money to flow in the pockets of the noble houses that divvied up the planets of the system.

Ves aimed to complete multiple tasks in the Cinach System.

Its abundant shipyards meant he could finally send his Barracuda to a drydock.

Its expansive industries and trade channels meant that he'd be able to get in touch with both the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association and the Circle of Mota. If neither of these clubs offered what he wanted, then he could always divert to the other underground organizations that operated in the underbelly of the Cinach System.

"Every port system hosts a lively underground economy. If Cinach is anything like Bentheim, then there's an abundance of gangs operating beneath the surface."

Even so, the Sentinel Kingdom acted a lot more strictly against any organizations with connections to pirates. The Circle of Mota's presence in Cinach was extremely sensitive and prone to frequent relocations. If Lady Miralix hadn't vouched for him, he would have never been able to get his foot in the door with the secretive and elusive trading platform!

Just before the fleet emerged in the Cinach System, Nitaa requested a private meeting with Ves. Her grave face caused him to raise his vigilance.

"What's the matter, Nitaa?"

"I've performed some research and got in touch with some of my former comrades. What I've learned is distressing. It's likely that the Five Scrolls Compact maintains a presence in Cinach through yet another splinter organization."

Ves paused for a moment. "Do you think it's the Circle of Mota?"

"It's possible." She tentatively nodded. "I haven't been able to determine for sure, but it sounds like something that they would facilitate. Most splinters serve as conduits for information and intel. If they're really involved with the Circle of Mota, then the Compact also gains a clandestine trade channel that they can use to obtain valuable resources without leaving any obvious trails."

Both of them grew grave as they processed the possibilities. While Ves was a bit annoyed that Nitaa hadn't been able to confirm whether the Circle of Mota acted as a front for the Compact, he'd have to be a lot more careful with his identity while he was present.

Ves had the feeling that he might be entering a lion's den if he visited one of their temporary trading sites!

The Compact already controlled an even larger black market organization in the form of the Angel's Wing Foundation! This made him feel that his fears were justified in this case.

Still, just because the Compact had their tentacles on them both did not deter him from doing business with them when it suited him. In any case, as long as he did not give away any clues that he possessed the System, then it was fine for him to transact with the lackeys of the Compact.

"Is there a chance that a main member of the Compact is present in the Circle of Mota?"

"The chances of that are low." Nitaa replied. "The brothers and sisters of the Compact are very hesitant about visiting highly-populated systems. I don't think you'll have anything to fear on that front."

They briefly discussed the precautions they had to take to keep Ves safe. Once they finished going over their plans concerning their visit to the Circle, Ves asked another question.

"Have you heard anything about what the Compact is doing these days? Have they made any moves recently?"

Her face scrunched up in worry. "I did receive some hints that the Compact has become more active starting a few months ago. The Order of Fl'ixix back in the Kinner Tribe has begun to make some secret preparations. For what, I'm not sure."

"Could it be the Ruined Temple?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. Their envoys should still be years away from arrival. From what I can read between the lines, the Order of Fl'ixix may have received a warning for something that might occur in the near future."

All of this sounded disconcerting to Ves. Something that worried the Five Scrolls Compact should definitely be something that concerned him as well!

Chapter 1432 Cinach

Ves smiled as the fleet emerged on the outer edge of the Cinach System. Just as he expected, the star system hosted a boisterous amount of traffic as thousands of trade vessels and passenger ships.

One of the strengths of the Cinach System was that it held a large number of planets and moons. All of this real estate enriched the ruling noble houses and attracted even greater amounts of trade.

The Cinach System hosted three notable planets.

Cinach VI under the control of House Evenson hosted a large number of mech companies. While the other planets in the system produced mechs as well, Cinach VI worked hard to become the premier destination to anything related to mechs.

Cinach VIII under the rule of House Gin Tefa excelled in education and research. It hosted a large number of universities and research institutions that produced and employed a large number of highly-educated people. Many

of these universities ranked in the top of their respective fields in the Sentinel Kingdom!

Cinach XII may be the most distant planet from the local star, but it hosted lots of non-mech related industries. Most raw materials entering the Cinach System arrived at Cinach XI in order to go through extensive processing before they were being passed to the hungry industries elsewhere on the planet and in the system!

The latter planet also happened to feature an extensive orbital industry geared towards producing, repairing and modifying all kinds of starships!

The first priority that Ves wanted to address was to bring the Barracuda to one of the drydocks they booked. While the ships of the Battle Criers parked in the orbit of a moon, the Barracuda flew ahead and entered one of the massive structures orbiting Cinach XII.

As the corvette settled into the drydock, Ves called up Crindon and Captain Silvestra for a brief meeting.

"Has the shipwright company agreed to perform the planned overhauls?"

The captain nodded. "Yes, sir. Nothing has changed despite the slight delay in our arrival. Aside from paying an additional fee, the work can still proceed."

"After this, my vessel will be a lot more secure, right?"

"Relatively." Crindon noted with care. "Jammers will still be necessary if you want to enjoy a moment of privacy. We're essentially exchanging Fridayman ship components with Hexer ship components. You can bet that the Hexers will keep a very close eye on you through the backdoors they've implemented in their own parts. In addition, the CFA and MTA will always have access to the systems of your ship."

Ves groaned in exasperation. "How do the pirates manage this problem, then?!"

"They're smart enough to produce their own homegrown communication systems, sir. While not every pirate is as diligent, the more established and powerful pirate gangs all tear out the existing communication systems and replace them with versions developed by their own kind. Of course, it's very probable that those communication systems come with backdoors as well. This is why belonging to a pirate alliance is so highly prized by their ilk. If they are to be subject to monitoring, then they would be watched by their own side!"

That made sense. The Dragon Alliance and the Ravienne Alliance were the two premier pirate blocs in the Faris Star Region. A lot of pirates that Ves encountered in the frontier dreamed of becoming a part of those alliances. The backing they provided massively increased the chances of survival for the pirates who were lucky enough to shelter under a large umbrella!

"I'm getting really tired of dealing with all of these backdoors all the time." Ves groaned again. "When we get back to the Bright Republic, I think I'll start developing and producing my own communication systems from the ground up. Do you think that's viable?"

Crindon immediately expressed some doubts. "It's a lot more complicated than you think. While it is easy enough to create a decent communication system, it's the security issues that require the most attention. I can help on this front, but I'm not trained to program security suites from scratch."

"You have a point. I guess I'll have to consider this option further."

"I think you're heading in the right direction. Every large and wealthy organization develops their own communication systems. While this does not

make them immune to hacking, they will at least be able to minimize their vulnerabilities against their own rivals.\

However, Captain Silvestra added another caveat. \“You can’t replicate every communication system. Instantaneous communication across all of human space is an essential capability, but the Comm Consortium maintains a tight grip on the development and production of quantum entanglement nodes. This is one communication system that you can never reproduce!\”

That was also true. It was unthinkable for Ves to rip out the quantum entanglement node residing on the Barracuda. The best the upcoming overhaul could accomplish was replacing some of the external subcomponents produced by companies they trusted more.

Ves left Crindon and Captain Silvestra and the rest of the crew of the Barracuda to assist and supervise the extensive overhaul in the works.

All of the work being done required about two to three weeks to complete, which meant that Ves had plenty of time to fulfill his other goals in the meantime.

A week went by as Ves visited numerous Journeyman on Cinach VI. He got to see his new reputation at work as every mech designer he exchanged offered at least something substantial.

While none of these meetings prompted Ves to learn anything drastic that shifted his paradigms, he still picked up a few useful insights.

Every mech designer viewed mechs in a different light. Though Ves started to encounter a lot of overlap in the opinions expressed by the local mech designers, he nonetheless felt he gained something by broadening his perspective.

As he wrapped up his schedule of exchanges, Ves also briefly met with a Shadow Courier to obtain some of his long-awaited cargo in a seemingly-abandoned warehouse on Cinach VI.

"Your package, Mr. Larkinson." The dark-robed woman spoke as she passed a secure box to Ves. "Please inspect its contents."

Ves did so. As he opened up the box, he whipped up his Vulcaneye and scanned all of the key materials held within.

The sulomnium, beta-otricine and Flesha's Tears he asked for were all present in the right quantities. Their quality also passed muster.

"Everything is in order." He smiled as he stowed away his multiscanner and passed the box to Nitaa. "Before you go, can I pass my own package through your network?"

"We are at your service, Mr. Larkinson." The robed woman bowed with perhaps a bit more deference than usual due to the Pride of Dusk. "We guarantee that every message or parcel you entrust to us will be delivered without fail, or your money back."

"Good, because I have a small package that I want to deliver to someone in the Ylvaine Protectorate."

Ves and the Shadow Courier quickly concluded a deal. He had to pay a considerable sum in the tune of tens of millions of bright credits for what amounted to the delivery of an encrypted data chip, but he had no other choice.

The contents of the data chip contained his request for Calabast to scour the resource markets for more possible P-stones. Ves included all of the scanning data on the two P-stones so that Calabast and her underlings would know how to identify them based on their distinct emission footprints.

Once he concluded his meeting with the Shadow Courier, Ves felt ready to proceed to the next phase of his stay in the Cinach System.

"Let's visit the local branch of the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association." He announced.

He and his escorts had to move all the way to Cinach XII where the Peacekeepers set up their branch.

Since Cinach was a port system, the Peacekeepers established a very large and extensive branch on the surface of Cinach XII.

"Many mercenaries and treasure hunters travel back and forth between the Cinach System and the Nyxian Gap." Gavin explained. "The Peacekeeper branch on Cinach XII attracts a lot of mech pilots, mech commanders, mech designers, traders and representatives of major companies. A lot of goods and services change hands here as Nyxian spoils are highly prized. Some of the most lucrative transactions in the system take place in their exclusive trading halls!"

The key word here was exclusive. The Peacekeepers existed to organize every private outfit that was willing to undertake missions in the Nyxian Gap under a united banner. Because some of their spoils were in high demand, the Peacekeepers limited the possible business partners that were allowed to take part.

In general, the Peacekeepers mainly catered to the nobility of the Sentinel Kingdom. In rare instances, people like Ves who received the backing of a noble were also permitted to do business under certain circumstances.

The pass that Ves received from Lady Miralix only allowed Ves to participate for a couple of days. It was much harder for her to arrange a permanent pass to a foreign guest like him. At its heart, the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association existed to advance the interests of Sentinels, not foreigners!

"Do any organizations like the Peacekeepers exist in the Bright Republic?" Ves asked as he leisurely stroked Lucky's back.

"Not as far as I know, boss. While the Bright Republic is fairly close to the frontier, most of our private outfits are more engaged with jobs closer to home. The frequent wars against the Vesia Kingdom makes it difficult for us to turn our attention to the wealth that we can extract from the frontier."

"Ah. That makes sense, Benny."

Right now, Ves and his usual followers were traveling aboard an armored shuttle that slowly brought them to the expansive grounds of the Peacekeepers. A small squad of Battle Crier mechs discharged their usual task of escorting the shuttle as well.

Commander Cinnabar accompanied him as well this time.

"What do you think about the mission of the Peacekeepers, commander?"

He shrugged. "I don't think the Peacekeepers are as honorable and upright as they claim. The Nyxian Gap is one of the roughest regions in our star sector. Communication is difficult if not outright impossible, so anything can take place inside. I'm sure the Peacekeeper outfits have all been driven to desperation at some point as they performed their missions."

"That's very cynical of you to say that, commander."

"The Nyxian Gap is a region that operates without rules. Those who try to abide by them will always face a disadvantage against those who possess no scruples."

Ves glowered a bit when he heard this. As far as he knew, his missing father still hid somewhere in the Nyxian Gap. The investigators hired by his grandfather hadn't managed to discover anything else. This illustrated the immense difficulty in obtaining any useful intel from this dreaded region!

"What do you think, Nitaa?"

"I'm not too familiar with the Peacekeepers, but I know that some of the outfits have hired fellow Kinners. Some tasks are so sensitive that employers demand absolute trust from the mech pilots they send into the Nyxian Gap."

"And these Kinners are okay with being deployed to the Nyxian Gap?"

Both Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar shared a look with each other.

"That's the life of a Kinner, sir. To be fair, we're only willing to perform these dangerous tasks if we signed a good contract. We're expensive for a reason."

Ves knew very well considering that he paid a lot of money to permanently secure the services of two Kinner bondsmen.

After some time had passed the shuttle finally landed at a landing zone within the campus-like grounds of the Peacekeepers.

"We're here!"

The branch of the Peacekeepers occupied as much space as a city district. Interspersed between plazas, parks and broad avenues, Ves spotted many different trading halls, employment centers, warehouses, mech workshops and other facilities.

As soon as Ves went through a brief inspection where the security guards verified the validity of his temporary pass, he quickly led his followers to one of the trading halls.

"Let's go! We don't have a lot of time, so I plan to make the most of this visit!"

Chapter 1433 Nyxian Hearsay

Ves became dazzled by the variety of goods on offer. Though most of it consisted of exotics prospected from asteroids and other satellites within the Nyxian Gap, he became impressed at the sheer variety on offer.

"The selection of goods here is only topped by the sheer variety of goods for sale at Centerpoint!" Ves gasped.

The trading halls of the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association offered a lot of juicy goods at a lot more reasonable prices than those that Ves encountered at Centerpoint!

Of course, this was one of the benefits of getting access to the Peacekeepers. Only the well-connected Sentinels enjoyed such favorable treatment.

It made him miss his access to the Clifford Society. He could have exchanged all of the merits he saved up on something good.

It would have been nice if Ves managed to obtain permanent membership to the Peacekeepers, but that was not in the cards.

"So what are we looking for, boss?"

"Hmmm... it would be nice if I can get another P-stone." Ves mulled for a moment. "I'd also like to secure more geril spice and learn where it comes from. I'll also keep my eyes peeled for other curiosities."

This time, Ves opted to wear his full Pride of Dusk ensemble over his business attire. The sight immediately attracted the attention and respect of others, especially as he weakened the aura-filtering barrier around his overcoat.

Normally, he loathed presenting himself in such an ostentatious fashion. This time was different, though.

Just like other exclusive trading platforms, the traders here cared a lot about the people they transacted with. A nobody would not be able to gain access to the more exclusive goods and services on offer. Even if they managed to convince a trader to sell something, then the prices they had to pay may turn out to be prohibitively high!

The effect of his outfit made a huge difference. As he calmly waded through the bazaars, not a single vendor or trader treated him lightly!

Even when he placed his silly decorative cat ears on top of his head, this still didn't detract from the respect he received!

Neither his wealth nor his status of a Journeyman caused the Peacekeepers to take note. Instead, with the aid of his Pride of Dusk, the locals mainly acknowledged his involvement in a successful Crown Hunt!

Sadly, even as Ves encountered numerous interesting goods, he didn't actually encounter anything he considered a must-buy.

Conscious of his budget, he was loath to blow his reserves on expensive trinkets with dubious value.

While the Peacekeepers offered an impressive variety of exotic, none of them were relevant to him. Occasionally, he did come across a few materials that Ves wanted to add to his Devil Tiger mech, but he left them alone.

It was too expensive to buy all of these interesting exotics! The Devil Tiger already forced him to expend too much money and resources. There was no need for him to sink more investment into a mech that was already prohibitively expensive.

Of course, just because Ves didn't feel the urge to procure anything special didn't mean that Lucky was the same.

"Meow! Meow! Meow!"

Just like when they visited Centerpiece's marketplace, Lucky acted like he entered a dragon's hoard. His cat clung to his shoulders and constantly patted his cheek and pointed his paws at a certain store within the trading hall.

"Stop hitting me, Lucky!"

"Meow!"

"I don't care if there's Rorach's Bone for sale in that store! Do you know how expensive they can get?! The windfall mined from the Glowing Planet has all been gobbled up by the various states that took part in breaking it apart!"

In fact, Ves wasn't sure whether the Rorach's Bone emerged from the Nyxian Gap or the Glowing Planet.

Its regenerative properties were highly valued but also hard to work with. While he could think of plenty of uses for the material, obtaining a sample of Rorach's Bone was more of a luxury than a necessity to Ves.

"Meow!"

"I'm not neglecting you! I'm just watching my budget, that's all!"

In order to placate Lucky, Ves bought some cheaper exotics, forking over the equivalent of tens of millions of bright credits each.

Lucky's complaints quickly subsided with the purchases. The cat comfortably munched on a hardy mineral as Ves and his followers moved on and visited other trading halls.

Aside from exotics, the Peacekeepers also traded a lot of salvaged and captured mechs and ships.

"A lot of pirate spoils are for sale here." Ves noted.

"If you want to pick up some mechs or ships for cheap, here's your chance."

Ves grimaced. "No need. I can produce my own mechs, and I'd rather obtain my ships from reputable sources."

He still browsed the venues to learn what kind of equipment the Nyxian pirates used. While he encountered plenty of mechs and vessels they probably stole from their victims, he also stumbled across numerous offerings that appeared to be produced by the pirates themselves!

"While the Nyxian Gap is a harsh region, the Nyxians can be very inventive sometimes, sir." The vendor politely explained. The Pride of Dusk exerted a lot of pressure on his shoulders. "The Nyxian Gap is home to quite a number of exiled mech designers and even shipwrights. If they're skilled and good enough, the pirate outfits lure them to work on their behalf. That's how most of the products that I'm selling have come about."

Ves grew curious as he inspected some of the salvaged mechs. The quality of most of them were quite decent!

"How much industry takes place in the Nyxian Gap?"

The vendor looked apologetic. "I have no idea. Most of the Nyxian Gap is just an empty sea of asteroids, but I've heard stories that there are places where the pirates have built space stations or larger settlements at some sites."

"How large are we talking about?"

"Not as large as Cinach XII or anything. I don't think there's any settlement that hosts more than a hundred-thousand Nyxian pirates, but don't take my word for it. I only hear some rumors every now and then."

Though the seller claimed he didn't know a lot, his position within the Peacekeepers exposed him to a lot of hearsay and rumors.

One of the reasons that Ves spent so much time in the trading halls was to sample some of these rumors. He wouldn't be able to approach so many Peacekeeper staff otherwise!

Ves kept his ears out for stories of random pirates and dark mercenaries, hoping to hear any signs of his father.

However, his father probably did everything possible to obscure his identity in the Nyxian Gap! There was no way he'd be stupid enough to use his real name while he remained in hiding!

"The Oblivion Hand has been gaining ground lately." One of the vendors gossiped. "Ever since the Dark Cleaver, their new commander, launched a coup against Commander Dafoe, they've been making a lot of noise. They made a lot of enemies along the way, but under the leadership of the Dark Cleaver, the Oblivion Hand managed to break every enemy that stood in their way and absorb the defeated remnants into their ranks!"

"Uh huh. That sounds very interesting, but let's move on." Ves muttered with a disinterested expression. "Have you heard about any settlements in the Nyxian Gap?"

"Well, supposedly there's a really huge pirate haven in the Nyxian Gap. Some of the pirates the Peacekeepers have captured have claimed to have visited a hollowed-out rogue planet in the deepest parts of the Nyxian Gap."

That immediately aroused Ves' interest. "Tell me more."

"It's supposedly called the Archport and is under the absolute control of a pirate boss who styles himself as the Enlightened King. From all of the pirates the Peacekeepers have captured and interrogated over the years, we're pretty sure that the Archport exists."

"Such a massive pirate haven sounds like a great target for the Peacekeepers."

"It would, if it wasn't so deep in the Nyxian Gap." The vendor retorted.

"Unless the Peacekeepers manage to find some sort of shortcut, it literally takes decades to reach this far into the Archport!"

"That sounds ridiculous!"

"That's how space travel is like in the Nyxian Gap. There's a lot of oddities at work. Distances don't make sense sometimes, and this problem will only grow more severe the deeper you head into the inner region of the Gap. It's as if

there's a massive hole in reality in the center of the region that radiates all kinds of strange anomalous effects in the surrounding space."

That might very well be true. A lot of scientists cracked their heads to figure out how the Nyxian Gap came into being. Perhaps some kind of extremely powerful magnetar got struck by some ancient alien superweapon which collapsed and scrambled the space it used to occupy.

The phenomenon of space compression meant that the Nyxian Gap encompassed a much smaller region of space than it appeared on the maps. It was just that the inability to engage in FTL travel counteracted this effect.

"I see." Ves nodded thoughtfully. "If it literally takes decades to reach the Archport from the outside, then I'm not surprised that the Peacekeepers haven't done anything about it. Do you think it actually exists?"

"Yeah. We don't have any idea how to get there, though. I'm sure that some kind of shortcut exists that shaves off the travel time, but strangely enough, the pirates who claimed to have visited the Archport literally don't know. The knowledge of this route has been plucked from their brains!"

That caused Ves to grow suspicious. He began to wonder whether the Five Scrolls Compact secretly controlled this so-called Archport. It made a lot of sense and it fit their modus operandi.

However, Ves could lodge this accusation to a lot of things. He even entertained suspicions that the Compact even managed to infiltrate the Peacekeepers!

Ves vigorously shook his head. There he went again, letting his paranoia get the better of him. It was ridiculous for him to suspect that the Peacekeepers were secretly controlled by the Compact considering that the aristocracy was firmly in control of the organization.

As Ves continued to interact with the vendors and other staff, he abruptly paused when he noticed a very remarkable piece of salvage for sale.

Ves turned and immediately approached a specific store. He walked up to one of the projections that showed something that he never expected to find in this region of space.

"This..." Gavin hesitated. "This wreck looks like it came from an Aurora Titan. Is.. is this your mech?"

His lips curled downwards. "No. It's an imitation, and a good one at that!"

The imitation mech suffered very heavy damage and almost every part of its exterior sustained damage. Nevertheless, Ves could easily imagine that the machine performed close to the authentic versions produced by the LMC and NORA Consolidated!

Ves shook his head at the sight. "Let's go."

"Don't you want to purchase the wreck and investigate it further?" Gavin asked.

"Nah. I've already seen what I've wanted to see. I'm pretty sure the copycat mech didn't come from one of the underground mech manufacturers based in the Reinald Republic. I'm not interested in learning more."

Every mech designer who designed a good mech suffered from copycats looking to rip off their work. It was futile for Ves to try to stamp them out completely. If the MTA wasn't able or willing to do so, then what could he do?

What Ves found most egregious about the wreck of the imitation he encountered was that he actually sensed the hint of something remarkable in its projection!

This meant that the copycat mech manufacturers managed to obtain the full design schematics and reproduce them well enough that they even managed to impart their imitation mechs with a hint of X-Factor!

This did not bode well for Ves and the LMC!

Chapter 1434 Another Find

Ves got what he came for during his visit to the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association. The gossip, rumors and other nuggets of information he pumped from the mouths of the Peacekeepers at their branch on Cinach XII might not be the most reliable intel around, but collectively they painted a broad inside picture of the Nyxian Gap.

His perspective of the Nyxian Gap had deepened. He became a little bit more aware of the dynamic between Peacekeepers and Nyxians. The Nyxians themselves also fought against each other for supremacy, survival or greed.

The highly unusual anomalous effects within this vast, disturbing region of space led to the emergence of a unique society where fugitives and exiles found second lives as brutal pirates or merciless dark mercenaries.

As Ves and his followers entered a private courtyard in order to enjoy some lunch, they began to share their own thoughts.

"The Nyxian Gap is like a supercharged version of the frontier." Ves opined.

"The resources there are richer, but the pirates there are far more ruthless."

Commander Cinnabar scratched his red beard. "The population of humans in our star sector is astounding when you think about it. Only about 3.5 percent of them are potentates, of which many of them become mech pilots. Of this group, only a miniscule proportion turn into bad apples."

"When you think in percentages, the proportion seems small. But when you start counting in absolute numbers, the figure is quite astonishing!" Ves

summed up. "No one knows how many mech pilots roam the Nyxian Gap, but I've heard estimates ranging from a million to a hundred million mech pilots!"

A hundred million mech pilots! Though Ves personally thought this estimate was way too inflated, if the pirates could muster up even a fraction of that number, they could easily overrun the Sentinel Kingdom!

However, while analysts generally agree that the Nyxian Gap harbored a lot of scum, their sense of unity was non-existent. Pirate alliances existed, but the effective size of the Nyxian Gap was too large to exert effective control over large regions of space within the Gap.

In the Faris Star Region, both the Dragon Alliance and the Ravienne Alliance held sway over considerable portions of space. Navigating between their holdings was generally easy, as it didn't take more than a few months to go from one end to the other end of their territory.

Not so for the Nyxian Gap. Dozens or even hundreds of disparate pirate alliances existed in a region where it took decades, centuries or even millennia to travel from one end to the other end of the Gap! The lack of FTL travel really hampered any group's ability to assert effective dominance over the entire region!

Surprisingly, Gavin mentioned an upside. "The Nyxian Gap is a magnet for trouble, but I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. Don't you realize how few wars the Sentinel Kingdom has fought against other states? Sentinel and the other states in the vicinity of the Nyxian Gap are more interested in defending against pirates and exploiting the boundless resources of the Nyxian Gap than waging destructive wars against each other!"

"The states know if they are pulled in any war, then the Nyxian pirates will all come out of the woodwork to take advantage of the chaos." Nita remarked. "They'll be the only winners of war by the time the fighting ends."

All of this sounded probable to Ves. He never heard of any instances like the Bright-Vesia Wars occurring in this corner of the star sector. Every state already had their hands full trying to defend their territories against the ravages of pirates.

No matter how many pirates they exterminated, there was always more!

This reflected the ubiquity of bad apples within the mech piloting community. Potentates did not magically transform into virtuous saints when they trained to become mech pilots. While the mech academies did their best to instill notions of honor, duty, sacrifice, justice and other virtues, people were just too diverse!

Some mech pilots were just too rotten to redeem or turn a new leaf. When these dangerous and unstable individuals entered the cockpits of their mechs, their capacity for murder, destruction and other violent acts went through the roof!

When these rotten mech pilots finally showed their true nature, they were no longer welcome in civilized space. They needed to find somewhere to escape pursuit!

Places like the frontier and the Nyxian Gap therefore ended up as the garbage dumps of the star sector. They accumulated all of the human trash that the Komodo Star Sector generated and digested them into the next generation of pirates and scum!

"Hey, it's not just the mech pilots who have turned pirate, you know!" Gavin complained. "An even greater number of norms like us are driven to desperation as well."

"Even mech designers aren't exempt." Ves nodded in agreement.

A lot of people who entered the Nyxian Gap didn't have what it took to survive or retain their freedom. Many of them died, and most who survived ended up as slaves or lackeys to powerful pirate gangs.

Only the strongest and most ruthless among these fugitives ended up on top and gained a measure of power over their lives. The Nyxian Gap constantly brought out the worst in people because they had no other choice if they wanted to survive!

The thought of his father trying to stay alive while avoiding the Five Scrolls Compact weighed heavily on Ves. He had to grow stronger before he could save his father!

However, even as a Journeyman, his ability to influence his father's fate was still non-existent!

At this rate, by the time Ves finally advanced to Master, his father might reach the end of his lifespan!

He vigorously shook his head. He couldn't let himself fall into despair! Perhaps he might be able to offer aid sooner. Ves would just have to keep his eye on the Nyxian Gap and wait for opportunities to help his father or hinder the Five Scrolls Compact.

"Meow."

Lucky just finished crunching the minerals served in a small bowl placed on the table, but he was already begging for more!

"You already ate enough for the day!" Ves admonished his cat.

"Meow!"

"If you want to earn more, then be on the lookout for anything interesting!"

Once everyone finished their lunch, Ves resumed trawling the trading halls and other venues for gossip and something interesting to buy.

Along the way, Ves also kept a lookout on imitations of his work. Yet aside from the copycat Aurora Titan wreck he encountered earlier, he hadn't found any other ripoffs.

He didn't know whether to feel relieved or insulted.

"The LMC hasn't expanded its reach to this part of the star sector yet." Gavin noted. "Give it time. I'm sure more imitation mechs will pop up in the markets here."

Ves sighed. "Yeah, you're right. There's no way we can beat the plague of copycats."

"The best the LMC can do is to expand their presence in the Sentinel Kingdom and elsewhere. When there are legitimate copies for sale here, many mech buyers will opt to buy from us. All of our mechs are certified by the MTA, after all. Who knows what kind of corners and backdoors the illicit producers have sneaked into their copycat mechs."

Ves snorted. "According to what I've heard, the black markets have developed their own solution for that, though their reliability still isn't as good as the MTA."

Black market organizations knew that they had to provide some measure of assurance to their buyers. They employed various mech designers as mech appraisers who could inspect and judge the true state of a mech for a fee.

While the reliability of these mech appraisers were always in question, they were better than nothing!

As Ves continued to hang around in the Peacekeeper halls, he began to attract an increasing amount of attention. His overcoat as well as his recent accomplishment caused various Peacekeepers to observe him closely. He even received a couple of commission requests from various outfits!

He refused them all on the spot. Ves did not intend to entangle himself any further within the Sentinel Kingdom.

None of the commissions promised anything interesting as a reward either. Ves had better things to do than to spend months to design a custom mech for an underwhelming sum of money.

Though Ves felt a little bit flattered at being approached, none of the offers matched the rewards given by Lady Miralix. None of the Peacekeepers managed to match her sincerity!

As Ves kept browsing the goods for sale, he continually kept his senses, hoping to catch another P-stone in the wild. According to Lady Miralix, his second P-stone originally came from the Nyxian Gap, so Ves held some hope that he'd be able to find another sample among the goods that the Peacekeepers managed to gather!

Sadly for him, Ves failed to uncover any new P-stones that he could add to his collection.

However, he did find one interesting exotic that attracted his attention.

When he idly brushed his spiritual senses over the rock, his spiritual energy suddenly seethed in excitement!

"Huh!?"

Even Lucky, who clung to his shoulder, suddenly jerked his head at the mineral.

"Meow!"

"I know! Stay put!"

Wary of being ripped off, Ves did not immediately enter the store that sold the exotic that reacted to his spirituality. Instead, he lingered around the section of

the trading hall and pretended to browse the other wares for sale while he cautiously inspected the rock with his spiritual senses.

From his brief glimpse, he saw that the exotic looked like a gnarly bright yellow rock with strange red dots spread throughout its surface. It resembled a squat, solid mango infested by parasites.

It was these strange red dots that caused the spiritual energy he extended to react. As Ves extended a more solid spiritual tentacle towards the strange exotic, he closely observed the interaction that took place.

As soon as his spiritual tentacle pressed against one of the red dots, a charged sensation ran through his Spirituality! It was as if he encountered a high-quality source of spiritual energy!

"This!"

His eyes widened as he kept inspecting the exotic with his spiritual senses. He continually revised his evaluation of the strange exotic as his Spirituality continued to experience charged sensations from the strange rock.

"What is happening?"

Upon closer inspection, he realized that his spiritual energy actually started to change upon interacting with the red-spotted yellow rock! Ves immediately drew back his spiritual senses for fear of contamination!

Yet despite this threat, his fascination for the exotic did not decrease! Exotics that reacted to spirituality were far too rare, so even this suspicious rock merited his attention!

Ves continued to act nonchalant for ten more minutes before he finally gave in to his temptation. He casually entered the store that sold the yellow rock and a variety of other exotics and slowly came over to his intended destination.

"I haven't seen anything like this before. Where did you get it?" He asked the vendor.

The man on the other side of the counter hesitated for a moment.

Right now, Ves had dialed up the strength of the aura of his overcoat, thereby exerting a lot of pressure to the salesman!

The staffer did not have the courage to pull off any shenanigans. He answered the question without any embellishments.

"This sample is part of some spoils brought back more than a year ago by one of our Peacekeeper outfits. Ostensibly, the rock came from the center of the Nyxian Gap. While we have no way of verifying this claim, we've never found anything like it, so the chances are low that it can be found in the periphery of the Nyxian Gap!"

That discouraged Ves a bit. The second type of exotic he found that reacted to spirituality turned out to be another unicorn-like exotic that was extremely difficult to find! It was impossible for the Peacekeepers to travel all the way to the center of the Nyxian Gap!

Chapter 1435 Charged Energy

Ves already spent several days at the Peacekeeper branch on Cinach XII. While its trading halls sold a large variety of exotics and other spoils, he hadn't bought anything aside from snacks for Lucky.

He didn't consider any of the goods he'd seen so far to be must-buys.

While some exotics possessed interesting properties, they were usually expensive for him to bother.

The second-hand mechs, ships and other equipment for sale were not in good condition and of dubious construction. If Ves wanted to buy some new equipment, then he might as well buy them from the legitimate markets!

Amidst all of the junk, the yellow rock covered with mysterious red dots stood out from the junk due to its intriguing reaction to spirituality!

Even now when Ves had already retracted his spiritual senses, he still felt some lingering charge running through his spiritual energy. It was as if his Spirituality had been injected by a stimulant that turned it hyperactive!

"What's it called?" Ves asked the intimidated salesman.

"It's official name is a bunch of serial numbers as we haven't found anything like it before. Personally, I like to call it the fruit rock. Don't you think it kind of looks like a passion fruit but with its seeds strewn all over?"

The name sounded undignified for a rare exotic that reacted to spirituality, but it wasn't as if his own naming sense was any better!

"What does this so-called fruit rock do?"

The vendor shrugged. "In truth, we don't know. While we've subjected it to lots of scans that confirms that it is an exotic due to its activity levels, we haven't found any effects or applications so far. It's just another weird space rock that might be capable of achieving something great in the right hands."

Ves smirked. "If this rock is really great, then it would have been sold by now. You said it was recovered a year ago? How much time did it spend in this display cabinet? It looks like you have a hard time getting rid of it. I don't blame you since it doesn't look like it does anything."

"That's just because its full potential hasn't been uncovered yet, customer!"

A messy negotiation ensued. Despite the intimidation that the vendor experienced from Ves and his coat, his salesman instincts were too strong to be suppressed!

Even so, Ves firmly held the upper hand during the bargaining. With the tantalizing fruit rock within such close reach, he no longer wanted to play the long game and pressed for a quick transaction!

While Ves eventually paid more than what he would have if he expressed less interest, he still found the cost to be bearable. All in all, he managed to get away with a valuable exotic that promised something new to him by forking over the equivalent of around 78 million bright credits.

That was still a lot of money, but easily bearable to a Journeyman like him! In fact, Ves secured an absolute steal at this insanely-low price!

As the salesman carefully transferred the rock into a container and passed it over, Ves thanked the man and eagerly stepped out of the store.

"Meow."

Lucky jumped down to the top of the container in Ves' grasp and directed his cute eyes towards the contents.

"No, Lucky! This isn't your food, so stop begging!"

"Meow meow!"

"Look, just like the P-stone, if I find more samples of this exotic, I'll feed you some, okay?!"

"Meow!"

Lucky only stayed long enough to secure this concession from Ves. The cat jumped back to his shoulder and settled down constantly.

As soon as Ves secured his prize, he quickly led his group out of the Peacekeeper branch and back to their hotel on Cinach XII.

There, he immediately jammed his hotel room while inspecting his new find with great interest.

"What's with all of the excitement, boss? Is this exotic really that good?"

"I'm about to find out, hehe." Ves eagerly rubbed his hands before whipping out his Vulcaneye.

Along with his purchase, he also received a lot of files containing scanning data, but Ves wanted to make sure they were accurate.

So far, the scans his Vulcaneye returned concurred with the data he received.

Only a single discrepancy occurred. The activity level of the exotic he dubbed the F-stone had dropped by a tiny but measurable degree. Had the exotic degraded over time or did his recent actions drain it of some of its energy?

Ves began to investigate by extending his spiritual energy in the form of a detached spiritual projection while keeping his Vulcaneye active.

"Ah!"

Upon contact, his spiritual projection reacted as if it gained a very energetic charge all of a sudden! The effect was even more pronounced this time as the charge concentrated solely on the projection rather than the rest of his Spirituality!

In truth, his probe was very reckless. If not for his haste and eagerness to uncover the secrets of his new F-stone, he would have never sent out a chunk of his spiritual energy as a lab rat!

Nonetheless, as Ves became fascinated at the strange charge infused in his spiritual projection, he hardly cared about the potential dangers it posed. His intuition hinted to him that he was observing something good!

However, when Ves directed his gaze towards his multiscanner, he found that the activity level of his F-stone experienced another drop during the moment his spiritual projection came into contact!

Evidently, the F-stone acted as a container for a finite amount of unknown energy! The more he charged his Spirituality with this strange energy, the more he depleted the F-stone's reserves!

"Damnit! Is it a finite source?"

As Ves continued to monitor the activity level of the F-stone, it didn't look like it was starting to recover what it lost. Though he would have to keep an eye on the F-stone for a longer period of time to be sure, he suspected that nothing would change no matter how long he waited!

This meant that Ves had no way to recharge the F-stone once it expended its entire reserve!

Ves felt a bit bummed at the finding. His enthusiasm for the new F-stone diminished now that he realized that it was essentially a single-charge battery!

"What a waste! Rechargeable batteries are always better than single-charge batteries!"

Nonetheless, he should be happy that he uncovered something pertinent to his interests at all. Exotics that reacted to spirituality was way too rare, so finding the F-stone still represented a major coup.

Now, he just had to figure out what the hell this strange charge did to the spiritual energy it touched.

"Hmm."

He began to inspect his charged spiritual projection. The detached tentacle floated before his eyes as he engaged his spiritual vision. As he delved deeper into the altered concentration of spirituality, he inspected its attributes.

This was where he suddenly found a difference!

"It's changed! No, it's still the same, but there's something extra in the mix!"

Ves knew his own Spirituality the best. He long memorized every spiritual attribute that could be found in his spiritual energy along with their relative proportions. The most dominant attributes pertained to mechs in some way, but there were also plenty of other attributes related to his personality that he couldn't quite identify for the moment.

Regardless, in the years since he gained awareness of his own Spirituality, he never experienced any drastic changes in the mix.

Yet now, his charged spiritual projection suddenly gained an additional attribute! And in large quantities as well!

It was as if he drank coffee without sweetener for his entire life, but one day accidentally dropped some sugar in his drink!

Ves compared his main Spirituality and his detached projection and saw that the latter contained much more of the extra attribute. This meant that the charge that he previously gained was in such low quantities that it didn't really result in a noticeable shift. Only when he charged a portion of his spiritual energy did it become easier for him to spot the addition.

Now that he found out that his spiritual energy gained an extra attribute, he quickly started to investigate its nature.

It was very difficult for Ves to uncover the exact nature of an attribute, especially since he did not possess a frame of reference. He wasn't even sure about the natures of his own attributes!

Nevertheless, Ves did not encounter a lot of ambiguity when he inspected the nature of the extra attribute that the F-stone infused in his spiritual projection.

For some reason, he got the sense that the attribute was related to might and offensive power. He began to regard his spiritual projection as a sharp knife that could inflict a lot more damage than before!

"Curious."

Ves spontaneously decided to test it out. The only other spiritual entity on hand was Zeigra's spiritual fragment that he locked within his overcoat. He immediately turned his attention to the garment, which he hung up at a nearby coat rack, and mentally sent out his charged spiritual projection.

His overcoat pulsed in pain! The changes in the aura were so acute that Nitaa and Gavin unconsciously flinched!

Ves quickly retracted his spiritual projection, which seemed to have lost some of its charge.

The experiment confirmed his suspicion! Whatever charge his F-stone held, transferring it to his spiritual energy before using it to attack another spiritual energy resulted in a lot more damage than before!

"This exotic is a treasure!"

After performing several other, less drastic experiments, he found out that he could empower his entire Spirituality if he wished so, but he needed to absorb a lot more charge if he wanted to empower it to a drastic degree.

Since the F-stone's charge did not regenerate or recover on its own, Ves was loath to perform such a wasteful experiment. As long as he only possessed a single specimen, he couldn't afford to expend its charge too quickly!

Ves happily ended his observation and experiments and stowed away the F-stone into its container. He'd carry it around for now until he returned to the Barracuda, where he could safely stow it away in the ship's vault.

"What's this exotic all about?" Gavin frowned. "You've been slobbering all over your new purchase as if it was a giant piece of candy. Is it really that valuable to you?"

"Oh, it's very valuable, Benny. Perhaps others might not know what to do with it, but it's different for me. From now on, we should add F-stones to the list of must-buy exotics. I can never have too few of them! As for what they do... let's just say that they're valuable. Not just to me, but also others."

Ves pointedly turned towards Nitaa. "Did you sense anything strange about the F-stone?"

She shook her head. "No. My nose didn't pick up anything different."

Nitaa happened to be one of the few people around who possessed a small but noticeable quantity of spiritual energy.

An idea came to mind. What if instead of charging his own Spirituality, he made use of the F-stone to charge someone else's spiritual energy?

He had no idea what might result from such an interaction. Though Ves felt tempted to whip out his F-stone again and see what happened if it charged Nitaa's spirituality, that was way too reckless.

It was too irresponsible for him to treat his own bodyguard as his test subject!

If only he had one of the Cursed People's beast riders around! Ves had no qualms about subjecting them to this potentially dangerous experiment!

Ves sighed and shoved his complaints aside.

"I'm very happy with my purchase today. Our visit to the Peacekeepers has been more than worth it in my regard. Since we've already scoured their trading halls, there's nothing for us to find. I'm not interested in socializing with the Peacekeepers or partaking in their services."

"So.. does that mean we'll visit the Circle of Mota next?"

"Not yet." Ves shook his head. "First, I want to rent a secure workshop. It's time for me to fabricate a very special mech!"

Chapter 1436 Rented Equipmen

Once his excitement for the discovery of the F-stone faded, he began to address a priority that he had long been waiting to tackle.

"The Devil Tiger yearns to be born!"

Ves already finalized the design shortly before he arrived in Cinach. Not only did he impart it with a very lively if rebellious design spirit, but he also collected all of the requisite materials.

The Battle Criers even received the shipment of pure ASMAS on his behalf. Right now, the supply ships of the Kinner mercenary corps stored all of the materials in their cargo holds.

Ves summoned both Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar for a meeting.

"Nitaa, have you secured a suitable workshop where I can fabricate my mech in secret?"

His bodyguard nodded. "I've anonymously approached an underground syndicate that's in control of an industrial district in a medium-sized city. They've agreed to let us use a well-equipped but abandoned mech workshop in exchange for a hefty fee. They demand half of the payment up-front."

"Details, please."

The tall woman handed over a data pad to Ves where he studied the layout and the equipment of the workshop.

Though the tools and equipment looked a bit aged, they were well-maintained. That was better than he expected out of an illicit workshop.

"I'm okay with it. Go ahead and confirm the agreement. Take care of the up-front payment as well."

"Will do, sir. We're free to enter the workshop as soon as the syndicate confirms they've received the money."

"Good. I want this done quickly. Commander Cinnabar, please coordinate with Crindon about the transfer of materials down to the workshop. I don't want to leave any traces, understood?"

Both of them nodded. While they had no idea what Ves was up to, they were Kinners. It wasn't in their nature to question their employers too much.

"We'll have to shuffle the materials around for a while if we want to obscure their providence, sir. To be safe, we should also transfer its contents to different cargo containers and dispose of the empty ones."

"Take care of it. I trust that you'll ensure we won't leave any loopholes behind for investigators to trace my activities to me. Do you need more time or resources to complete these arrangements?"

Nitaa looked confident. "It won't take more than a day. If any complications arise, I'll inform you as soon as possible."

"Sounds good. Don't hesitate to ask for advice from Crindon if necessary."

Having a diverse staff on hand provided him with a lot more conveniences than before. Ordinarily, Ves would have contacted a black market organization himself to make all of these arrangements, but now that he expanded his staff, why not delegate these tedious tasks to his underlings?

While assigning Crindon to this task would have been better, his security expert was still preoccupied with supervising the overhaul of the Barracuda.

In any case, Nitaa was not a simple bodyguard. While she failed to perform well enough to be admitted into the Order of Fl'ix, she still acquired many of their skills. The Kinner order did more than guarding people. Spying, investigating and interacting with underground organizations also fell within their competences.

In short, Ves regarded Nitaa as a budget spy. The only major deficiency she suffered from was that she didn't know how to hack. The most she could do was utilize an automatic hacking tool or program.

Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar immediately started rolling the ball. Taking care to hide their identities with each step of the way, they confirmed their agreement with the syndicate who owned the mech workshop before starting to transfer their cargo down to the surface of Cinach XII.

While Cinach VI provided a much better infrastructure for the production of mechs than Cinach XII, Ves did not wish to bother with the hassle of moving back to the sixth planet from the local sun.

Besides, Cinach XII possessed its own advantages. The presence of the branch of the Peacekeepers along with extensive heavy industries meant that a lot of cargo got shifted around.

It was easy enough to insert a few unremarkable cargo containers in the enormous flow of traffic and shuffle them from warehouse to warehouse.

Though the logistical operation kept Nitaa and the Battle Criers very busy, at the end of the day all of the cargo containers safely arrived at the workshop through an underground entrance.

Ves also arrived at the mech workshop through shifty means. He secretly departed from his hotel with the use of his Stealth Augment and under disguise.

He had to leave Gavin behind along with a member of the Battle Criers who acted as a decoy by wearing the Pride of Dusk. While the deception was far from foolproof, it was good enough to confuse most casual inspections.

In the end, Ves, Lucky and Nitaa arrived at the mech workshop through the same underground tunnels they used to deliver the cargo containers.

As Ves stepped foot in the mech workshop, he briefly inspected all of the equipment and became satisfied with what he saw.

"Alright, Lucky. Go snoop around and see if the syndicate we've hired the workshop from have left behind any bugs."

"Meow."

Ves sighed. "Okay, okay!"

He put his hand in the pocket of his obscuring high coat and withdrew a small mineral chunk. He threw it over Lucky's head who immediately jumped up to snap the exotic with his maw!

Having received his prize, Lucky happily floated away with his tail swishing in happiness.

"You too, Nitaa. Please sweep the mech workshop to make sure there aren't any traps lying around."

"Understood."

You could never be too sure when dealing with these underground organizations. While Lucky and Nitaa thoroughly inspected every corner of the facility, Ves approached the equipment and started inspecting their software and hardware.

If the syndicate wanted to keep an eye on what went on in the mech workshop, they wouldn't do something as crude as placing hidden bugs and sensors all over the place.

They'd bug the fabrication machines instead!

While the 3D printer, assembly system and all the other equipment seemed in order at first glance, Ves was very familiar with how they worked. If he wanted to bug the machines, he could think up a million different ways on how it could be done!

With his paranoid tendencies, Ves did not hesitate to waste half a day inspecting all of the machines in person.

He cracked open the 3D printer and scanned every individual component inside.

He utilized an automated hacking software to access the root programming of each machine in order to find any discrepancies.

He activated the machines and used some spare materials to test and witness their performance. This proved to be a prudent precaution because he found that some of the subcomponents had become misaligned due to extensive use.

To be honest, the misalignment was not a big deal, but it annoyed him to hell when he thought about leaving them alone. After he diverted his time, he continued to delve in the guts of the production equipment.

"Ahah! Gotcha! I knew they wouldn't be able to resist!"

While the 3D printer ostensibly appeared proper, in truth Ves found an extremely tiny component hidden deep within the enormous machine.

The component acted as a secret logger! While the 3D printer's regular logging software and components had already been removed, this tiny, non-standard part essentially replicated some of their functioning in secret!

Anyone who retrieved the data the tiny component gathered would be able to reconstruct what Ves had produced with the machine!

Ves removed and crushed the tiny component as soon as possible. Having found solid proof that the local syndicate lied to him, he resumed his search with much more diligence than before.

He found no more bugs.

"Did I catch them all, or did I miss some?" He wondered.

He wasn't sure, but he wouldn't be able to find anything else even if he searched again. As much as he wanted to indulge in his paranoia and conduct another search, he already wasted enough time.

"It's about time for me to start." He declared.

He began the long preparation of taking out the materials. He did not use the mech workshop's own lifter bots to move all of the heavy goods but instead used the ones he bought earlier in the day. He already inspected them thoroughly and planned to destroy them afterwards to minimize the risk of exposure.

"I can never be too sure!"

He felt as if he was back to fabricating a prohibited gamma laser rifle. While his Devil Tiger was not strictly as egregious as a weapon of mass destruction, its existence would most definitely lead to a lot of controversy!

Still.. the risks he was toying with exciting him. The thought of finally bringing a dangerous mech like the Devil Tiger into existence quickly stoked his passion.

"It's been long enough! I can't hold back any longer!"

Ves eagerly dove into the fabrication process. First, he took out the pure ASMAS that formed the inner core of his mech.

Stored in a huge barrel, the pure ASMAS that Gloriana procured for him looked no different from a grey, mercury-like soup at first glance.

Preparing it was the simplest step of all. Ves merely had to pass on the programming and instructions he already composed beforehand.

In fact, the fabrication process this time proceeded very differently than normal. The high degree of smart metal utilized in the mech meant that his Devil Tiger was essentially capable of constructing itself!

Once he inspected the pure ASMAS and verified that it had all implemented their new programming, he began to place several piles of materials surrounding the alien-like mass of shifting metals.

After sending a few more instructions, the pure ASMAS began to engulf some of the metal and alloy bars. An uncountable amount of nanomachines quickly began to break apart the bars into tiny particles.

A second pool of shifting, morphing metal began to form. This was the substitute ASMAS made of lesser materials. As more than half of the Devil Tiger consisted of substitute ASMAS, its production took a lot of time, all the while the pure ASMAS demanded a constant supply of energy to power its nanofabrication activities.

Ves witnessed the slow process of forming the initial mass of substitute ASMAS with a mixed expression.

He had the feeling he was looking at a potential future direction of mech production. If smart metal technology ever matured to the point where they could compete with conventionally-produced mechs, then it may become more in vogue, thereby making huge mech manufacturing complexes redundant!

"Well, that's unlikely. Materialization technology is already making some strides, so that will probably achieve universality first."

He quickly centered his mind and rid himself of all distractions. This was a period where he had to devote his utmost into fabricating the Devil Tiger. Even though the use of ASMAS took a lot of work on his hands, there were plenty of parts that still had to be built conventionally.

With a focused mind, he began to activate the 3D printer and other production equipment and proceeded to churn out various parts. The power reactor, the

mech engine, the cockpit, portions of the internal frame as well as other miscellaneous components quickly flew out of the production machines.

His passion and enthusiasm for his project caused him to enter into a strange state of tranquility. While he didn't burn with as much passion as he did when he fabricated the Transcendent Messengers, he nonetheless believed he was doing a better job than before.

The parts of the Devil Tiger slowly accumulated. Though Ves had not put them all together yet, he already sensed the potency hidden within.

With the exceptional amount of care and attention Ves directed to his work, practically everything went flawlessly. Even as Ves triple-checked the freshly-fabricated parts by subjecting them to scans, he hardly found any discrepancies!

His belief in his Devil Tiger grew. With such exceptionally flawless parts, Ves wanted to do everything possible to turn his latest mech into something exceptional!

His pride as a craftsman demanded no less!

Chapter 1437 State of Absolute Focus

The Devil Tiger design represented several milestones of progress in his design career.

It was his first smart metal mech.

It was his first true bestial mech.

It was his first mech which utilized a complete spiritual entity as its design spirit.

It was his first mech where he used an involuntary design spirit.

It was his first mech that utilized a much more unrestrained neural interface.

If his Devil Tiger only encompassed one of those firsts, then the mech did not merit such weight.

Yet because his design pioneered so many aspects in a single mech frame, it gained greater significance in his eyes.

Though he was proud of his Aurora Titan and Transcendent Messenger designs, he considered the Devil Tiger to be his first true inaugural work since becoming a Journeyman.

His design seed matured enough that it provided a great amount of assistance in his latest design project. It not only accelerated his design work, but also led him to develop many small but ingenious innovations.

In addition, conducting exchanges with numerous Journeyman polished his design work even further. Even if the lessons he learned did not pertain directly to his specialty or his interests, he still found it useful to acquire a perspective on how his Devil Tiger stood among the immense spectrum of mech designs.

From a commercial standpoint, the value of the Devil Tiger looked dubious. Though it performed better than third-class mechs, it did not match up to the standards of a second-class mech. Yet its cost firmly pushed it up to the latter anyway due to its expensive ASMAS.

A product like this was a huge commercial failure.

In truth, the businessman within Ves found the Devil Tiger to be highly repellent.

Its price-performance ratio was abysmal and he wasn't even sure if any demand for this type of mech even existed.

Its whole mech concept went against the established grain on the rare terrestrial battlefields of the Nyxian Gap.

Yet for all of these impracticalities, the artist and craftsman side of Ves viewed his Devil Tiger design in a completely different light!

Aside from the innovations he incorporated as experiments, the Devil Tiger also represented a sharp divergence from established convention.

It was the first 'living' mech designed by Ves that extensively embraced the path of life.

Its high autonomy, its self-dependence and its ability to help or hinder its mech pilot to a much more extensive degree led to great implications.

Ves believed it to be the first living mech to shift the power balance between mech and mech pilots!

Mechs should always be under the control of their mech pilots. This was one of the fundamental principles that defined mechs for hundreds of years.

The mech community did not have a good opinion of mechs aided by AIs and heavy automation. Mech pilots ought to express their genuine skill and spontaneity rather than leave most of the decision-making to rigid, static processors.

Yet the Devil Tiger might be the first mech that broke this convention but suffer none of the usual downsides.

Empowering his Devil Tiger with Zeigra's spirituality did not mean the mech pilot could sit back and let the deceased Crown Cat do all of the work.

No. The mech pilot still had to pitch in. Only through combining the strengths of the mech and mech pilots in a symbiotic relationship would they both be able to achieve an astounding level of performance!

"My Devil Tiger will surely live up to its promises!"

One of the most central aspects about his Devil Tiger was that while it may not be too impressive right now, it possessed the greatest potential of growth than any other mech he designed.

In both a spiritual and physical aspect, the Devil Tiger was still in its infancy. As long as the mech was not fully destroyed, it could always bounce back greater and stronger than before!

Theoretically, there was no upper boundary to its growth! As long as Zeigra's spirituality kept growing and the mech kept digesting more powerful exotics, it might one day be capable of rivalling first-class mechs!

This was not an empty boast. Back when he occupied Axelar Streon's mind during one of his Mastery experiences, he learned that first-class mechs did not differ all that much from third-class mechs.

Sure, their tech and amazing materials granted them amazing strength, but underneath the hood they all shared common roots to the most humblest mechs.

Since the Devil Tiger shared the same roots as well, theoretically the mech might be capable of surpassing the Ouroboros, the first-class hero mech that he designed for Axelar!

"It requires both time and investment, but.. I believe in the Devil Tiger. Its urge to survive and thrive will see it through."

Imparting it with Zeigra's spirituality may not have been his original intention, but Ves believed it to be a real boon for his Devil Tiger. Their qualities and inclinations matched too well with each other.

"It's like the Devil Tiger is tailor-made to accommodate the spirituality of a metal-eating Crown Cat from the start!"

The fabrication of the mech proceeded in a different fashion than before.

The production of substitute ASMAS that constituted the bulk of the frame of his mech required little intervention. The only problem was that the process happened a bit slowly.

However, this left Ves with much less fabrication work than normal. He took great advantage of his reduced workload by spending much more attention on the fabrication of conventional components.

Nothing contained any notable flaws. Ves demanded the utmost from each and every part, even if his design could tolerate a lot more imperfections.

He only had one shot at making the Devil Tiger. There would never be a second copy of its design.

"My Devil Tiger has to start off on the best footing possible!"

The immense significance of the Devil Tiger to his artistic and philosophical progression drove Ves to enter in a peculiar state of mind.

Rather than burning hot with passion or being driven by momentum, Ves entered an altered state where his focus had become razor sharp.

His normally-jumbled and chaotic mind grew incredibly quiet. His focus reached a degree where it became a sharp that cut through all of the distractions conjured up by his overactive imagination.

The absolute focus helped him enormously in maintaining an extreme but incredibly consistent quality level during his work. He became extremely meticulous but not too inefficient. It was as if he always came up with the right solutions at the right time.

No problem confounded him! Even if he worked with old, worn production equipment, he effortlessly compensated for their quirks and idiosyncrasies!

Once he finished fabricating and inspecting all of the parts, he returned to the site where he let the ASMAS work on its own.

Ves found it to be a bit discordant for him to be so detached from the fabrication of the bulk of the mech. While the pure ASMAS did its work wonderfully, he found it a bit jarring because of its heartless and overly-inhuman replication process.

Even though Ves extensively programmed the pure ASMAS during the design process, he did not possess a strong sense of ownership towards both types of ASMAS.

"It lacks.. a human touch."

He always emphasized the importance of involving humans in the creation of mechs. This was especially so for custom mechs!

While the pure ASMAS went on its merry way to churn out more and more substitute ASMAS, Ves decided he had to do something to correct its inadequacies.

He called up his design in his mind and tried to impress it on the ASMAS.

The substitute ASMAS took it on surprisingly well. The pure ASMAS less so because Ves hadn't originally produced it himself, but in time it gained a spiritual quality that conformed to the design.

He still sensed a lingering discrepancy, though.

Ves spontaneously invested a small portion of his spiritual energy into the ASMAS. This decision quickly caused the ASMAS to take on a more personal feel, as if Ves had crafted each and every single nanomachine by hand!

"That's better!" He smiled.

A sudden realization struck him immediately after he did this. He even paused his state of absolute focus over this amazing development!

He invented another new spiritual technique!

This new technique which he came up with to address a glaring deficiency addressed a problem that long hindered Ves.

The fabrication of his gold label mechs consumed too much time. While its value was undeniable, it did not make sense to remain stuck in the Mech Nursery for years on end just so that he could churn out a gold label mech every three days.

He'd deprive himself of too much time that he could spend on more productive activities such as designing a new mech or studying new knowledge!

Yet the new technique served as a possible means to liberate himself from this time-consuming activity.

"If I'm right.. I can essentially upgrade a silver label mech into a gold label mech!"

He decided to call it spiritual imprinting. This was because he essentially imprinted a mech with his spiritual energy in a way that made it as if he crafted it by hand!

The only downside of this technique was that the imprinting required him to invest his spiritual energy. Perhaps he might not care too much if he did it once, but if he continually performed this technique several times a day, then he would quickly be sapping his strength!

His dreams of converting all of his silver label mechs into gold label mechs were dashed.

Everything had a price. The only way he could make it more bearable was to grow his Spirituality. If he became ten times or a hundred times more formidable, then the amount of mechs he could spiritually imprint became vastly more!

In fact, considering its limitations, Ves largely reserved the technique to the mechs of the Avatars of Myth. Only a portion of his personal force piloted LMC mechs, and of those mechs only a fraction actually consisted of gold label mechs.

As Ves wanted to turn his Avatars into a glorious example of a mech force that consisted fully of LMC mechs, they deserved as many gold label mechs as possible!

"Previously, I've always been limited by my lack of time, but now that I can substitute that with spiritual energy, it's much easier!"

Time was a finite resource, while his spiritual energy always regenerated over time.

The stronger he grew, the more his spiritual energy regeneration sped up. Since he was still a Journeyman, he had plenty of room to grow in this aspect!

He did not linger about the implications of his new technique for long. He highly prized the strange state of absolute focus he had previously immersed himself in. The longer he paused his work, the more it started to fade from his mind!

"I can't afford to lose my groove!"

Ves proceeded to the assembly phase. He gradually reentered his inspired focused state as he obsessively pieced his mech together.

Portions of the internal frame along with its critical parts were put into place. Hints of the Devil Tiger's feline form already emerged. Due to the scarcity of fixed parts, Ves finished his work quickly.

He found himself forced to wait until the pure ASMAS finished replicating all of the substitute ASMAS necessary to constitute a complete mech frame.

He sat patiently on a stool as he watched the amorphous, mercury-like pools of ASMAS continually dwindle the stock of materials.

Once the ASMAS completely consumed the available stock, he directed it to engulf the partially-assembled mech frame that Ves had prepared.

It was time to put some meat on the bones of his Devil Tiger.

With rapt attention, he watched as the pure ASMAS and substitute ASMAS crawled over the workshop floor. They neared the assembly system where the incomplete Devil Tiger awaited the arrival of its other half.

The moment of completion was at hand!

Chapter 1438 Sin of Altruism

Ves dreamt of this moment for months. Ever since he conceived of the Devil Tiger, he imagined many ways he could complete his mech.

Witnessing the ASMAS crawl from one section of the workshop to another section of the workshop under his instructions seemed surreal to him. The strange and unconventional way the Devil Tiger came together emphasized how different it was from his prior works.

A sense of anticipation welled up in his mind. He would finally be able to see the results of the ludicrous amount of resources and effort he put into the Devil Tiger.

After several days of working on the mech, he already believed the sole copy of his Devil Tiger design surpassed all of his fabrication attempts! The focus, care and attention he put into its creation exceeded the investment he put in his other great works such as the Transcendent Messengers or the Shield of Samar!

Perhaps a part of Ves found it to be an enormous waste of energy and potential to invest so much in a non-commercial, experimental mech. Yet now that the Devil Tiger finally came into being, he held no regrets!

As the ASMAS slowly arrived at the skeletal mech frame, it began to take its place.

The pure ASMAS moved first. It climbed up to the center of the mech and rested in the belly and lower chest of the tiger mech. This was the deepest and most well-protected section of the mech.

The Devil Tiger couldn't afford to lose its pure ASMAS! It had to be preserved at all costs!

Considering its extreme importance to the mech, the pure ASMAS settled into its place without consuming too much time.

Next, Ves transmitted another command that caused the substitute ASMAS to crawl over the outer portions of the mech frame. Like adding meat to bones, the much larger quantity of substitute ASMAS began to shift into support structures, conduits, artificial musculature bundles and most significantly armor plating.

This did not take much time either. Once the Devil Tiger looked complete, the grey exterior shifted in color until it took on a dark reddish coating with a black tiger stripe pattern emphasizing its feline nature.

This momentous visual change finally turned the Devil Tiger into the astonishing and exceptional mech that Ves envisioned!

The Devil Tiger emanated an extraordinary powerful splendor that momentarily washed over Ves like a tide!

The mere appearance of the mech already suggested that it was a menace to be taken seriously! Even if the machine lacked the distinctive aura that resulted from its exceptional X-Factor, the mech looked notable in ways that made a mech designer like Ves ecstatic!

Still... as he saw the words DEVIL TIGER forming on the flank of his creation, he started feeling a bit uncomfortable at the sight.

As much as the Devil Tiger already inspired admiration in him, Ves felt it had fallen just short of reaching its height.

His design seed churned and seethed with excitement again, hinting at him that the Devil Tiger was on the cusp of greatness!

"What is it missing? Why do I feel as if it is close to reaching a certain threshold?"

Instead of thinking too much over it, he let his instincts as a mech designer lead the way. An impulse prompted him to retrieve a very special pouch in the inside pocket of his disguised outfit.

As he opened the pouch, he observed the small collection of exceptional gems.

They were some of Lucky's best gems to date.

Produced after consuming an entire CFA shuttle among other valuable equipment, the gems possessed remarkable names and even more remarkable effects.

Each of them bore marks from his Anonymizing Stamp to eliminate their presence from sensors and scanners.

Even so, Ves still perceived their inner qualities.

He already used one of the gems in this collection on the Shield of Samar. The Ardent Wish empowered the mech gifted to Jannzi by increasing its spiritual feedback by a whopping 40 percent.

He wasn't quite sure what that meant, but Ves suspected that the Ardent Wish heavily assisted Jannzi in breaking through to expert candidate!

"Should I embed one of these precious gems to the Devil Tiger?"

He should have taken the question seriously. He already invested so much in the Devil Tiger that adding anything more to it was extremely unwise. How much more did he have to sacrifice in order to satisfy his artisanal urges?

It made no logical sense to impart the Devil Tiger with a rare gem!

Yet... Ves didn't listen to the rational part of his mind. In truth, he already sidelined it ever since he embarked on the project.

The artist and craftsman within him took primacy this time. His design seed fully resonated with him as he approached the Devil Tiger with a gem in hand.

Ves briefly studied the gem he had chosen to impart to his latest creation.

[Sin of Altruism]

The valor of a great sacrifice by an alien warrior is housed within this gem. Increases the damage resistance of external armor plating by 20 percent.

Ves still questioned its description. He inspected the Sin of Altruism with his spiritual senses over and over again and detected no trace of this so-called 'valor'!

Despite his brief doubts about the gem, he considered its properties to be especially suitable to the Devil Tiger.

In fact, Ves also considered using the Furnace of Regret instead. The gem boosted the output of the power reactor by 30 percent.

The Devil Tiger consumed a constant amount of energy during its operation. The ASMAS constantly required at least some power in order to hold itself together.

When the mech sustained heavy damage and lost a huge chunk of substitute ASMAS, then the pure ASMAS required both energy and materials to replenish the losses.

If the mech possessed a greater energy output, then it was much more capable regenerating itself on the field!

Though the choice tempted him for a moment, he eventually affirmed his choice to use the Sin of Altruism.

Part of the reason was because it addressed the most acute weakness of his mech. The Devil Tiger's heavy dependence on smart metal meant that it was much less durable than comparable mechs of the same cost. This was the number one reason why his Devil Tiger failed to meet the standard of a second-class mech.

Boosting the durability of its admittedly sub-standard armor meant that its most acute discrepancy received a very welcome reinforcement. The distance between the Devil Tiger and a second-class mech narrowed by a considerable margin with this addition.

Ves did not hesitate any further. Despite the extremely questionable wisdom of empowering a mech meant to be piloted by pirates or other scum, his pride of a mech designer demanded he do his utmost to transform the Devil Tiger into his best work to date!

"This is what must be done! No matter what practical value my Devil Tiger brings, its creative value must be unsurpassed!"

The state of absolute focus returned to him as he stepped all the way to one of the hind limbs of the dormant Devil Tiger. He craned his head upwards and faintly read the words DEVIL TIGER on its flank once again.

He could scarcely believe he made it this far. He overcame numerous challenges as he recklessly indulged in feature creep.

Though he demanded increasingly more out of his design project, all of his efforts were about to come into fruition at this pivotal moment!

"This is.. the final touch."

A solemn moment descended as Ves stretched out his arm. He brushed his fingers against the solid surface of the Devil Tiger's hind limb. A small scratching sound echoed as the gem he held within his fingers dragged over the surface of the armor.

Though from outward appearances the surface looked like a solid mass of armor, in truth it consisted of an innumerable amount of nanomachines too small to be observed by the naked eye.

The armor revealed its true nature by morphing like a liquid surface. It began to catch hold of the gem while ignoring his fingers. Following its programming, the substitute ASMAS absorbed the gem and tried to figure out how it could best put it to use.

"Ah. I almost forgot. It needs a little help. I doubt it knows what to do with the Sin of Altruism."

Ves raised his comm and withdrew a small wire from it before slotting it through the semi-fluid armor plating of his mech. He activated an interface and quickly began to program some additional instructions to the ASMAS.

A few minutes later, he completed the update and closed his comm. As Ves looked upwards again, the mech already started to take on a distinctly different quality.

It felt as if Ves had given the mech a pivotal push that raised it to a height it yearned to reach!

As Ves stepped back in order to behold the mech in its entirety, he attempted to determine his increasingly stronger affection for his Devil Tiger.

Suddenly, two things happened.

First, realization swept through his mind!

Second, his design seed metaphorically exploded in euphoria!

"The Devil Tiger.. has become a masterwork!"

Masterwork!

Ves could scarcely believe this claim. Yet as he observed the Devil Tiger more closely, his certainty only grew stronger.

He never expected to fabricate his first masterwork mech at this instance!

The definition of a masterwork was rather subjective and imprecise. However, Ves learned in his classes that competent mech designers possessed an innate sense to determine whether a mech had reached this fabled height!

A masterwork mech was not the most perfect specimen of a design. If that was the case, then the innumerable amounts of mechs produced through atomic materialization processes should have been declared masterworks!

A general description of a masterwork varied a lot. To Ves, a mech that was so coherently put together that its quality in every possible aspect surpassed the theoretical limits of its design!

Not only that, but its strengthened aspects melded and reinforced each other so well that the whole exceeded the sum of its parts!

When judging his newly-completed Devil Tiger, Ves became increasingly convinced that it fully embodied this definition!

Ves abruptly erupted in jubilation, startling both Nitaa and Lucky! "A masterwork! I created a masterwork! My first one! Hahahaha!"

He had reason to celebrate! The formation of a masterwork mech was a product of both skill and serendipity! It was highly sought after by every

serious mech designer, but few ever got to experience the glory of producing one!

It was impossible to fabricate a masterwork mech on demand!

Only Seniors or higher were good enough to create a Masterwork, but even then a large proportion of them lived through their entire careers without making this accomplishment!

While exceptions existed where Journeymen managed to create a Masterwork, they were extremely rare!

A masterwork mech only came into being if the mech designer personally fabricated the mech! While others could assist them in their work, they still needed to exert their personal direction and control over the fabrication process!

Mech designers who thought that fabricating a mech in person was beneath them never got to enjoy the unsurpassed glory of creating a masterwork!

This was the reason why even Seniors or Masters achieved amazing feats but never produced a single masterwork mech in their lives!

"I'm different from them! I'm not just an architect, but also a craftsman!"

Every artisanal crafting profession opened a door for masterworks. Even the original Amastendira was a masterwork laser pistol!

On average, a Senior fabricated just five masterwork mechs over the course of their entire careers! This figure was higher for Masters, but even then the count varied wildly between different individuals.

Still, one general guideline was that if a mech designer created a masterwork once, then they were surely able to create one again!

It might take decades or even a century depending on chance and circumstances, but someone like Ves would surely be able to achieve this height again in the future!

Chapter 1439 Unrecognized Achievements

Ves grinned so widely that Lucky and Nitaa became afraid that he would break his jaw!

"Meow?"

"It's a masterwork! Don't you see, Lucky! Just look at it! Don't you feel jealous of its magnificent form?"

"Meow!"

Lucky angrily phased out of his arms. Who was a masterwork! A magnificent gem cat like him was already a masterwork!

"Hahaha!"

Ves brushed off his cat's reaction and continued to admire the subtle but unmistakable presence of a masterwork in his latest mech!

All of the money, time, effort, resources and favors he expended to make it to this point had all been worth it! He had no doubts about this entire venture anymore! In fact, due to the amazing value of this accomplishment, he wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice the LMC and almost all of his entire network in order to form another masterwork!

Even now, his design seed underwent a small but seemingly pivotal evolution. Though Ves had no idea what it was doing, he nonetheless sensed that its transformation would doubtlessly strengthen it further in a certain direction!

Ves suspected that this change was related to what happened to mech designers once they created their first masterwork mechs.

Once they made this achievement, their affinity for fabrication mechs had grown! This resulted in a comprehensive improvement to any mechs they personally crafted!

To Ves, this meant that he could produce genuine gold label mechs with a much higher average quality level than before!

Another way of putting it was that the gap between his high-quality mechs and another masterwork mech had narrowed!

The reason why a mech designer who produced at least one masterwork mech would eventually be able to produce another was due to this very reason! They required a little bit less effort in order to repeat this accomplishment!

For this reason, Ves considered the creation of his first masterwork mech to be a seminal moment in his life!

A new door opened up for him now that he had surpassed this crafting threshold!

An immense sensation of pride washed over him as he lovingly admired his Devil Tiger over and over again. Through his exceptional efforts and his wondrous state during the fabrication process, Ves elevated its menacing form and its powerful capabilities to a higher standard, completely surpassing the potential of its original design!

Ves rubbed his chin as a question came to his mind. "Is the Sin of Altruism responsible for turning my Devil Tiger into a masterwork?"

The discrepancy that disturbed him a short while ago must be due to his subconscious perception that his Devil Tiger fell just short of becoming a masterwork. Only after he added the Sin of Altruism did he manage to get his Devil Tiger over the line!

Ves derived two conclusions from this deduction.

First, without the Sin of Altruism, his Devil Tiger almost met the standard of a masterwork mech through his own efforts.

His skill, experience, principles and personal inclinations all led him to attach great importance to adopting a craftsman's approach to his works.

Second, he could not depend on Lucky's gems alone to turn another into a masterwork.

If this was the case, then the Shield of Samar should have turned into his first masterwork mech when he added in the Ardent Wish!

He sighed. "It's not so easy for mech designers to produce masterworks."

A masterwork mech was the culmination of a mech designer's dedication to their craft from a practical approach.

Pure theory had nothing to do with it. A masterwork never emerged by mech designers who purely relied on their brains.

It was the application that mattered. The more romantic mech designers described the creation of a masterwork mech as infusing their love and devotion into the crafting process.

In a way, whenever Ves personally fabricated a mech, he already did this without the intention to create a masterwork mech. He just cared a lot, and it was this unconditional affection for mechs that led him to this threshold.

"Even so, only a tiny number of Journeymen ever get to create a masterwork at this stage in their careers!"

Generally, only Seniors started producing masterworks. While exceptions existed where a minute number of Journeymen managed to achieve the same feat, they were almost always very advanced in their careers!

"If you aren't over a century years old, you can forget about it! It can't be done!"

Yet Ves stupendously managed to produce a masterwork just a short time after he advanced to Journeyman! The circumstances boggled his mind, but the Devil Tiger did not lie!

Any Journeyman, not just Ves, could instinctively tell that the Devil Tiger was definitely a masterwork!

Ves clapped both of his cheeks with his palms as if he wanted to wake up from this dream.

The Devil Tiger was still there!

It was still the same!

"This is unbelievable!"

In truth, Ves already admitted to himself that he did not produce a masterwork mech through legitimate means.

He cheated.

The Sin of Altruism that strengthened the Devil Tiger's armor by a substantial degree addressed the only deficient factor that prevented the mech from becoming a masterwork!

How many mech designers possessed the same privilege of using such a reality-defying gem? As far as Ves knew, Lucky was unique! No one could buy another gem cat like him no matter how much money they were willing to offer!

He sighed. His professional integrity forced him to admit that he did not deserve to be counted among the ranks of mech designers who went above and beyond to produce their own masterwork mechs.

"If I don't have the luxury of using one of Lucky's best gems, then it might have taken many decades before I'm able to surpass the masterwork threshold through my own capabilities."

Frankly, he disrespected the accomplishments of other mech designers by counting himself amongst their ranks.

Yet... did he feel guilty for taking a shortcut where others poured blood, sweat and tears to reach the same height?

Nope.

"Who cares how I got to this point! The important part is that I've reached it! Every mech I fabricate from now on will forever benefit from the gains of this project!"

Ves successfully concluded the Devil Tiger project with numerous gains. Not only did he develop a multitude of new spiritual techniques, he also progressed his career by creating his first masterwork!

Though the costs were high, the benefits he accrued absolutely surpassed his wildest expectations!

However, once his jubilation and euphoria mellowed out, a very obvious practical problem popped up in his mind.

"I can't submit the Devil Tiger to the MTA to get my masterwork certificate. I'll turn into a fugitive if I do so!"

There was no way he could ever let himself be tied to the Devil Tiger, masterwork or not! The exceeding amount of discretion he employed in securing the materials and the mech workshop already demonstrated his extreme concern in his role in designing and creating the smart metal tiger mech.

Even now, Ves shuddered at the thought should a mech pilot begin to interface with his creation. Its exceptional quality did not make any difference concerning its lethality to its very own users!

Ves bopped his head with his palm in frustration!

"In the end, no one will recognize my achievement!"

More than that, Ves also felt frustrated at the reality that he wouldn't be able to sell his Devil Tiger to someone deserving enough to pilot such a grand machine.

If he had a choice, then he would not hesitate to bestow the mech to the Larkinsons!

He considered the Avatars of Myth as well, but it was too selfish to keep his masterwork mech to himself.

As long as the Larkinsons had a mech pilot who was proficient in piloting tiger mechs, then the Devil Tiger would have been a perfect fit!

Sadly, it was not to be. He had to stick to his original plan and find a way to sell his Devil Tiger to some scummy pirate commander who would doubtlessly use the masterwork mech for deplorable ends.

"I suppose I can overhaul the Devil Tiger to take out its controversial parts, but it won't be the same mech anymore." He muttered morosely.

It was immensely difficult to create a masterwork mech, but incredibly easy to ruin them. Each time Ves attempted to upgrade or modify the Devil Tiger, he risked breaking the qualities that turned it into a masterwork.

Of course, now that Ves had reached this point, he became very sensitive to what he should or shouldn't do in order to retain the Devil Tiger's masterwork standard.

This was why he quickly concluded that the expensive overhaul plan he formed in his mind was way too intrusive to keep the Devil Tiger exceptional.

Ves shook his head. "I don't want to change my mech anyway."

The Devil Tiger partially became a Masterwork because he poured his love into its design and creation. How could he betray his love by butchering and mutilating his own child?

"No matter what kind of nasty properties it possesses, it's still my work!"

He was even tempted to call his Devil Tiger a perfect mech, but he thought better of it. He wasn't Gloriana!

"She'd probably be ecstatic when I show off my mech to her!"

Sadly, he wouldn't be able to show off his Devil Tiger to her up close. The most he could do was to make detailed recordings of his mech so that she'd be able to enjoy at least some of its grandeur in high-fidelity projections.

"There's no way the Devil Tiger can remain in my possession for long. I have to get rid of it as soon as possible!"

He called up Nitaa, who had been observing Ves getting absorbed over his amazing accomplishment by himself.

"Is your new mech really that good, sir?" She asked.

"Yes. It's a genuine masterwork mech!"

She scratched her head. "I can't see that. It's just a mech to me. Are you really sure about your judgement?"

"My judgement is always right when it comes to mechs! Trust me, I'm a mech designer! I know my craft!"

It did not surprise him that a laywoman like Nitaa failed to recognize the splendor of his masterwork mech. In truth, most low-ranking mech pilots and mech designers would fail to see its exceptional quality as well.

Only the more perceptive and dedicated insiders in the mech community were capable of recognizing the Devil Tiger's true charm.

This was also what the MTA's masterwork certificate aimed to address. As the ultimate arbiters of everything related to mechs, their judgement was inviolable. If they stated that a mech was a masterwork mech, then no one held any doubts.

As for his Devil Tiger... Ves could only hope that the mech appraisers of the Circle of Mota would be able to recognize its true value when he submitted it for exchange or auction.

That reminded him of his next step. He still needed to pass his mech to a customer in order to complete the System's Upgrade Missions!

"How are you in your attempts to gain entry in the Circle of Mota?" He asked his bodyguard.

"I've already made a lot of headway, sir. I've used the credentials given to Lady Miralix to contact a middleman with ties to the Circle of Mota. It's been difficult to gain his trust despite Lady Miralix vouching for us. Because you wanted our identities to remain hidden, it's taken a very long time to get his agreement."

"Are there any hold-ups?"

She shook her head. "I had Gavin pass on a message to Lady Miralix to explain our difficulties. She recently intervened to sort out the middleman's issues. There's no problem now. We can depart to the temporary marketplace the Circle of Mota has set up whenever you want."

"That's great! Where is this clandestine site located?"

"Cinach VIII. A lot of shipments of classified goods enter and exit the planet due to its many research and educational institutions. It's also a trade hub for high-value goods."

That made a lot of sense, though Ves suspected that the Cinach authorities weren't completely blind to the smuggling that went on. How securely would he be able to smuggle his Devil Tiger to the surface of Cinach VIII?

Chapter 1440 The More Convenient Solution

Once Ves completed the Devil Tiger and finished celebrating the creation of his first masterwork mech, he moved out of the rented workshop.

He loaded the precious new masterwork mech into a large, specialized mech container laced with a scanner-dampening layer. A rented transport operated by the Battle Criers transported the container out of the premises through an underground tunnel network before being passed to a series of other rented transports.

Eventually, the transport deposited the container in a small, empty warehouse rented for the purpose. Bringing the container from the surface of Cinach XII was a bit troublesome, as the local authorities inspected every piece of cargo.

They could still try to smuggle out the container, but they needed some assistance from one of the local underground organizations. Nitaa already booked a slot aboard a discreet large transport that mostly carried legitimate cargo, but they had to wait a few days before they got their turn.

"How troublesome." Ves grumbled.

"We can't help it, sir." She shrugged. "As anonymous outsiders, we've been placed on the back of the waiting list. The only way to get priority is if you flash your identity to the smugglers."

"That would defeat the point of all of this subterfuge."

He would rather wait than leaving any trail behind. Masterwork mech or not, designing and fabricating an illegal mech would still land him in big trouble with the MTA!

"Stupid hypocrites." He muttered. "They persecute anyone who crosses the line while they're happily allowed to get away with their murky experiments."

The difference between the two was that he was just a solitary mech designer while the MTA possessed the power to dictate and enforce its rules whenever they wished!

Who wouldn't want to cut themselves some slack if they could get away with it? The MTA was no different from any other selfish organization in that regard!

After spending half a day travelling back and forth in disguise, Ves, Lucky and Nitaa finally sneaked their way back into the hotel.

They returned to safety!

Ves let down his guard and relaxed. Once the decoy who pretended to be him shed the Pride of Dusk and put the articles back in a closet, the hotel room had turned back into normal.

"Did you succeed?" Gavin asked.

"Beyond my wildest dreams, Benny. As long as we can send my package from Cinach XII to Cinach VIII, I can hopefully get it in the right hands."

"So we're heading to Cinach VIII next?"

"Yup. That will be our final stop before we depart the star system. Hopefully the overhauls to the Barracuda is complete by the time we are done."

After discussing some more routine arrangements, Ves finally dismissed his assistant. With only Nitaa and Lucky left in the bedroom, he made sure that enough jamming was in place before materializing his System comm.

Fabricating a masterwork mech was a massive accomplishment. Ves believed the System would definitely have something to say about his latest achievement!

Once he activated its interface, he received a small number of irrelevant messages. He only paid attention to those related to the Devil Tiger.

[Design Evaluation: Devil Tiger TG-Z]

Model name: Devil Tiger TG-Z

Original Manufacturer: Ves Larkinson

Weight Classification: Medium

Recommended Role: Offensive Tiger Mech

Armor: A

Carrying Capacity: E

Aesthetics: A

Endurance: B+

Energy Efficiency: C

Flexibility: D+

Firepower: B

Integrity: B+

Mobility: A

Spotting: B

X-Factor: A

Cost efficiency: F

Project involvement: 100%

Original component composition: 9%

Overall evaluation: The Devil Tiger is a tiger mech suited for long term skirmishing and survival. Its distinctive, augmented ASMAS grants the Devil Tiger the capacity to repair and upgrade its mech frame without outside assistance. Combined with its excellent mobility and armor durability, the Devil Tiger possesses the potential for infinite growth and strengthening. The only complicating factor is its volatile design spirit, who can exert considerable influence in aiding or hindering its mech pilot. The Devil Tiger's X-Factor is tied to Zeigra, the Mech Cruncher, a former genetic product and Crown Cat native to Felixia I.

[You have received 1000 Design Points for completing an original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

Ves immediately noted that the grades swung very wildly.

"How did you come up with these grades?" Ves puzzlingly asked. "What are the measuring standards, and how relative are the grades to comparable mech designs?"

Of course, the System didn't deign to answer this question.

Though Ves personally disagreed with some of the grades, he had to admit that the Devil Tiger was not a well-rounded mech. It lacked both flight and ranged weapon capabilities, its energy efficiency was pretty decent until it started to consume and process new materials, it couldn't carry any significant amounts of cargo, and so on.

This meant that while Ves designed the mech to operate by itself in the field if need be, the Devil Tiger truly excelled if a mech commander built a team of assisting mechs around its use.

"If its users have any sense, they'll utilize my Devil Tiger as a flanking mech!"

This was asking a bit much. Ves did not have much faith in the competence of pirates to be able to utilize his Devil Tiger with military-style tactics and coordination.

"Those stupid degenerates will probably put the Devil Tiger at the head of their swarm of mechs!"

It was a good thing that Ves added the Sin of Altruism to the sole physical copy of its design. The considerable upgrade to the armor of the mech essentially provided it with an added buffer against the many errors their pilots likely made over the course of its use.

Having spent a considerable amount of time in the frontier, Ves fully witnessed the low standards of the average pirates. More elite pirate outfits such as the Swordmaidens and the pirate alliances partially broke the mold, but even they fell short compared to the well-organized military mech regiments.

He turned to one of the most important grades of his mech design.

"So the X-Factor has reached an A. I never expected to reach this height again so soon!"

His first mech design with a solid A-grade X-Factor was the Aurora Titan. Back then, Ves predicted that it might take many years before he could design a mech of comparable strength in this area.

The Aurora Titan only got this far because of Qilanxo's donation of a precious spiritual fragment!

There was no way he could replicate this feat! Just finding a powerful exobeast with the spirituality equivalent to an ace pilot or a centuries-old

Sacred God was nearly impossible! Trying to negotiate a spiritual fragment out of them was unthinkable!

As for trying to steal a fragment from them, Ves could think of better ways to commit suicide!

Therefore, Ves did not actually expect that he managed to make it this far just by utilizing a mostly-whole spiritual entity as his Devil Tiger's design spirit!

"In the end, there's a considerable gulf in strength between a fragment and a complete entity!"

The System essentially confirmed to him that using an expert pilot-level spiritual entity brought the same degree of benefits as an ace-level spiritual fragment.

Considering the scarcity and immense difficulty of securing the latter, Ves vastly preferred the former! Going on a Crown Hunt may have been rather perilous to Ves, but at least he had a realistic chance of success!

In fact, now that he confirmed the viability of harvesting usable spiritual entities from exobeasts who weren't as rare and exceptional as Sacred Gods, Ves even began to consider farming them.

"Why should I go out and risk my life on an arduous Crown Hunt when I can just buy a huge cat from the company who develops and sells their species?"

House Laterna's research institutions cooked up a lot of experimental huge cats and released them into the Asco Continent to record their performance. However, facilitating huge game hunting was not their principal source of business.

Instead, they derived a greater portion of their income from selling the best-performing huge cats to customers!

Though the occurrence of spiritual potential in the huge cats was minute, as long as Ves made a careful selection, he could potentially obtain a specimen as strong as Zeigra as long as he bought a batch of likely candidates!

"This is how a mech designer ought to handle this issue! To us, any problem can be solved as long as we throw enough money at it! There's no need for us to do all of the heavy lifting ourselves!"

In hindsight, he shouldn't have participated in the Crown Hunt to begin with! Though he didn't regret accepting Lady Miralix's offer since the challenges he faced stimulated him into developing several new spiritual techniques, he couldn't keep wasting his time on needlessly-dangerous hunts.

He had better things to do with his time!

Since Ves did not suffer from any money problems lately, he could easily afford to go for the most expensive but convenient option.

"House Laterna isn't the only organization who develops genetic products. There's a huge market for powerful beasts!"

The idea had a lot of merit. As long as he set up a large-scale private preserve on some rural planet he could collect as many weird exobeasts and genetic products as he wanted!

Other people would probably dismiss this new preoccupation as yet another weird quirk of his, which was completely fine to Ves. As long as a handful of his collected beasts possessed spirituality, then it was more than worth it as each of them made another mech design with an A-grade X-Factor possible!

The entire arrangement introduced some much-needed structure, consistency and efficiency in his efforts to obtain powerful spiritual fragments and entities. He would no longer have to get his hands dirty by stealing highly-valued relics or hunt down a dangerous beast in person to harvest its spirituality upon its death!

"It would be even better if I own a research institution myself!"

Ves quickly shook his head. That was going a bit too far. The research and development of genetic products was an extremely difficult market to get into. A lot of companies who had been in the business for decades or centuries accumulated strong advantages by excelling in their specialties.

Starting a biotech research institution from scratch could get very expensive as it needed decades to ramp up to the point where it started to break even.

As a mech designer, Ves mainly wanted to focus his business activities around mechs. Trying to branch off in other sectors sounded like a good way to get distracted and slow down his career progression.

"I'll have to form some proper plans when I get back to the Bright Republic." He rubbed his chin in thought. "Considering the benefits I can accrue, it's still worth it for me to dip my toes in this sector."

For now, Ves wanted to move on and see what the System had to say about his masterwork mech. Once he dismissed the evaluation for his design, he finally received his anticipated announcements.

[You have personally assembled a masterwork mech based on your own Devil Tiger design!]

[Congratulations for assembling your first masterwork mech! As a mech designer, to create a masterwork mech is a grand achievement. Only mech designers and fabricators who thoroughly understand and develop a strong intuition for mechs are capable of creating mechs that holistically surpass the intent of the original design. Now that you have formed the first mech that passes this standard, your ability to produce mechs has undergone a holistic baptism that provides substantial benefits to your future works. Please work harder to replicate this feat to improve your affinity for mechs even further!]

[You have acquired Masterwork Mech Assembly !! Create more masterwork mechs to upgrade this Sub-Skill!]

[You have been awarded with one radiant lottery ticket! Create more masterwork mechs to receive more radiant lottery tickets!]

Ves immediately focused on the last announcement.

\\"What the heck is a radiant lottery ticket?\"