

Chapter 1441 Catching Fish

Ves once asked the System to explain its rating system. Copper, bronze, silver and gold already spoke for themselves, but the weirder names threw him for a loop.

He eventually learned that the aforementioned ratings were collectively grouped in the plainest category of ratings.

An additional category of ratings existed beyond gold and proceeded as followed:

Exceptional

Radiant

Supreme

An even greater category of ratings existed above that, but Ves was far from reaching a level of strength and capability where he could receive something so great!

At his current level, Ves already started slobbering his mouth at the thought of winning ten golden lottery tickets if he completed one of the System's insanely difficult Supply Missions!

"I'm too much of a pauper to think that far." He ruefully chuckled.

Right now, Ves only possessed two objects from the System rated beyond gold.

While Lucky started off with a lower rating, his constant upgrades and assimilation of valuable exotics elevated him to the point where the System regarded him as exceptional!

Yet even Lucky still fell short against his copy of Amastendira, which received an immensely-high rating of supreme!

Ves won the Amastendira from an extremely lucky pull from a golden lottery ticket. Since the 'jackpot' of a golden lottery ticket already reached this high, how much better was the jackpot of radiant lottery ticket?

"I'd probably be able to win something grand if I make a lucky pull!"

In reality, Ves did not think much of his odds of striking it rich. He knew the System well enough that most of its lottery tickets only yielded minimal prizes.

This was the entire reason why he insisted upon gaining a multitude of golden lottery tickets upon completing the System's Supply Missions! Perhaps he wouldn't strike it rich with a single ticket, but when he had up to fifty chances to do so, he'd definitely win at least a handful of extremely valuable prizes!

Yet the appearance of this radiant lottery ticket suggested that Ves had another way of winning a fantastic prize.

"I don't believe this lottery ticket will give me nothing but a consolation message if I don't get lucky! I should at least receive a prize rated as exceptional!"

He deserved it for fabricating his first masterwork mech. As he reread the System's message, he understood its significance.

The System really loved it when he created a masterwork mech! It always urged him to become a better mech designer. The more he progressed, the more he met the System's expectations!

A grand reward such as a radiant lottery ticket essentially signaled to him that the System was not opposed to giving him another treat if he created another masterwork mech!

Ves always felt like a puppy performing tricks for his master ever since he received the System. Its latest message and reward only reinforced their ongoing transactional relationship.

The radiant lottery ticket was not only a reward, but also a bribe!

Despite his misgivings over the Systems and its motives for fattening him up, for now he needed its assistance to grow stronger. Only until he became powerful enough to hinder the Five Scrolls Compact would he be able to fulfill his long-standing goals and ambitions.

"I shouldn't complain about receiving a radiant lottery ticket. Anything that brings me closer to achieving my goals is helpful!"

He knew that given the circumstances, it remained immensely difficult for him to craft another masterwork mech. The stars had to align and all kinds of conditions had to be favorable in order for him to reach this height again.

Receiving the Masterwork Mech Assembly I Sub-Skill helped lower the difficulty, but it could not replace all of the personal effort and sacrifice he put into the Devil Tiger. The more he invested in the mech, the more it gained significance to his design sensibilities.

One thing about the System's message did hint at something important, though. Just like he learned, the System stated that creating a masterwork mech increased a mech designer's affinity towards mechs!

What was the exact meaning behind this phrase? Ves immediately formed a guess and began to concentrate his mind in order to inspect his own Spirituality.

He immediately discovered a change!

His muddy and mixed spiritual energy looked the same as always, but with one key difference. The attribute related to mechs had undergone a small evolution! It became stronger and more pronounced!

Other than that, his design seed had also gone through a subtle improvement. Though Ves found it hard to determine what had actually changed, he knew

that whatever changed occurred improved both his design and fabrication capabilities!

While the creation of a masterwork mech mainly related to the assembly of mechs, his improved affinity for them also meant he would make less mistakes when he designed a mech.

"It's as if my intuition for mechs has improved. That will help me out in many mech-related aspects."

His improved affinity affected a broad swathe of activities, from appraising mechs to modifying them. No matter what he did with mechs, he would always be a little bit better at it than someone who possessed the same Attributes and Skills as him! Masterwork Mech Assembly I was not a Sub-Skill that he could buy from the System's Skill Tree!

"It is as if I increased my 'talent' for mech design!"

Even now, he deeply wanted to put his improved capabilities to the test by designing a new mech!

However, he quickly shelved aside this urge. This was not the time for him to indulge in a future design.

He still had a lottery ticket to redeem!

However, he quickly paused for a moment. Right now, he wasn't alone, and the hotel room itself might not be completely secure.

"I'll be heading to the bathroom for a moment."

Nitaa nodded. "I'll stand guard outside."

Ves grabbed Lucky who was comfortably lounging on the bed and brought his cat with him to the expansive bathroom attached to the main bedroom. Once he dumped Lucky onto the sink, he sat down at the closed toilet bowl and engaged his Privacy Shield.

If this lottery ticket was like any of his other great prize draws, then it would definitely conjure up a spectacle!

Once he became absolutely sure that no one except Lucky was snooping in on him, Ves diverted to his Inventory and finally used his radiant lottery ticket.

His entire surroundings shifted. It was as if a vast illusionary projection transformed the entire bathroom!

An alien environment greeted him. Green skies, yellow clouds and multiple moons stretched above his head. Closer to the ground, Ves observed that he was sitting on a rock placed at a raised plateau overlooking a vast, alien prairie!

Though the grasses were still green, the soil and rock stood out with their distinctly purple tint! Nothing about the environment suggested that it had been adapted or terraformed for humans!

He could even smell the wild and untamed alien wilderness! The scents and smells that assaulted his nose reinforced the impression that he'd been brought to an alien planet.

However, the air pressure, gravity and other factors remained the same as when he was back in his backroom. He was still on Cinach XII and the illusion the System conjured up was just another one of its fancy prize draw methods.

"After spinning a wheel and opening up a pagoda, this is what you've come up with, System?"

Nothing answered him. He looked around and tried to see how he could draw his prize from the empty clearing at the top of the mountain.

Eventually, he encountered a modest pool of water in the very center of the plateau. Dozens of small, finger-sized fish leisurely swam beneath its clear surface.

The fish all differed in appearances and inclinations.

Some possessed scales that featured every color of the rainbow while others appeared as black as charcoal.

Some of the fish possessed long, trailing whiskers while others possessed extra fins.

Ves deduced the intent of this pool. "Am I supposed to catch a fish to determine my prize?"

This method of prize drawing differed substantially from his previous lottery prize draws.

The System granted him much more agency this time! Rather than subjecting himself to the whims of chance and luck, now the System gave him greater power to decide his own winnings!

He'd be able to maximize his gains from his radiant lottery ticket as long as he caught the right fish!

"However... which fish is the best?" He frowned.

Ves had the feeling that the prize draw also served as a test. By giving him the power to decide his own catch, the burden of securing the best possible prize fell solely onto his shoulders.

He wouldn't be able to blame the System's miserly nature or his inconsistent luck if he ended up with a consolation prize!

"Damn! It's much simpler if I just spin a wheel again!"

He studied the disparate fish. Aside from their varying appearances and behavior, none of them seemed to be difficult for him to catch. Even if he hadn't upgraded his Dexterity Attribute by a heap, he would still be able to catch one of the leisurely-swimming fish.

He did notice that certain fish tended to linger at the edge while other fish lounged closer to the center of the pool. Some fish lingered deeper while others playfully leapt into the air at times.

Ves believed that the traits exhibited by the fish carried at least some profound meaning. The flashy, rainbow fish might contain an extravagant object. However, it might also contain a useless cosmetic item!

The fluorescently-glowing green fish may be carrying an infinitely-replenishable energy source. It might also give him a highly radioactive exotic!

He really hated puzzling out the meaning of the fish with his mind. He was a mech designer, not a fish breeder! Why the hell did the Mech Designer System serve such a dumb test? He just wanted to obtain a good prize from his radiant lottery ticket!

"Well, there's no use complaining." He sighed.

He began to inspect the fish carefully. After observing them for a few minutes with his eyes, he acted on a hunch and began to employ his spiritual senses and spiritual vision.

"Nothing."

It was an illusion, after all.

It seemed as if the System did not intend to test his spiritual perception this time.

He frowned and scratched his head. "What is the nature of this test?"

Another thought arose in his mind. "The way I see it, it's mainly a test of judgement. The more conventional way of solving it is to form assumptions and utilize my logic to deduce the most worthwhile fish to catch."

There was a problem with that. How could Ves possibly form the right assumptions when he knew absolutely nothing about fish? It was ridiculous for the System to expect him to be able to distinguish good from bad!

This was why Ves suspected that the System instead expected him to rely on another form of judgement to catch a good fish.

"The answer is intuition!"

Intuition! The ability to instinctively understand something without relying on conscious reasoning formed an important pillar of strength for high-ranking mech designers. Intuition distinguished mech designers from artificial intelligences that had been programmed to replicate their capabilities.

Even the most sophisticated AIs never succeeded in replicating the unique strengths of intuition which every sentient being possessed!

As soon as he made this realization, he began to look at the fish like he looked at mechs. If he ignored their surface traits and instead tried to get a feel of them, he immediately obtained some results!

"It's working! These fish are really similar to mechs!"

When he utilized his intuition towards the flashy rainbow fish, he no longer viewed it as the grand prize of this lottery draw.

Instead, all he saw was an overly-exaggerated mech designed purely to show off! Ves found very little substance beneath its bombastic appearance!

If Ves hadn't utilized his intuition, then he may have fallen for the System's trap and secured the most useless prize out of the radiant lottery ticket's prize pool!

Chapter 1442 Addressing A Need

At least half of the fish in the illusionary pool of the projected environment consisted of duds. That was his conclusion after brushing through most of the fish in the pool with his intuition.

Of course, his intuition might be mistaken, but he had a good feeling that his odds of drawing a consolation prize was truly fifty percent.

"If I didn't rely on any judgement and just caught a random fish, then my chances of catching a better fish is small!"

A considerable amount of fish that fell outside the dud category didn't appear much better. They looked fairly plain and gave Ves the impression of basic and serviceable mechs.

They did the job, but that was it. They didn't excel too strongly in their categories and they didn't bring anything remarkable to the table.

Removing them from consideration narrowed the pool of eligible further even further.

Of the fish that remained, Ves did not spot any major quality differences between them. All of the fish exhibited something remarkable. This suggested that he either failed to spot the grand prize or it didn't exist in this prize draw in the first place.

"Maybe it's invisible or buried underneath the soil or something."

He didn't spot anything that suggested that he missed a fish. Ves experimentally dipped his hand into the pool, but couldn't reach further past a certain depth. He couldn't inspect the underlying soil.

"Whatever."

If he couldn't find a fish that slipped through his detection, then so be it. Ves just wanted to move on and obtain his prize quickly.

"Let's see. Which fish is the best?"

If his suspicion was right, then no fish among those that remained in his consideration possessed a clear advantage over the other. It was just like how different mechs of radically different mech types and configurations were all for sale at the same price level.

Their valuation may be the same, but their actual value differed according to the needs of the customer.

For example, if Ves wanted to form a scouting unit, then he would rather procure a bunch of light mechs instead of a clunky heavy mech!

No matter how expensive the latter one sold for, it was virtually worthless for scouting purposes!

If Ves applied this perspective to his current situation, then he may be able to determine the nature of his own prize.

For example, the brown, thick-scaled fish might offer him an object with defensive capabilities. The slimmer fish with the most fins perhaps represented an object that enhanced his mobility.

The question that followed was which fish suited his purposes better than the other fishes?

He frowned. "What do I need?"

He needed a lot of things. Too much, in fact.

He wanted to strengthen his design capabilities. He wanted to grow his spiritual strength. He wanted to increase his ability to hide himself from his enemies. He wanted to find some way to screw over the Five Scrolls Compact. He wanted to progress faster than Gloriana.

He found it difficult to decide what he wanted the most!

"Even if I pick a priority, there's no guarantee that the fish that I've picked will truly address my need."

An element of uncertainty still remained. His intuition towards mechs might be strong, but it was not invincible! Trying to shoehorn his intuition towards mechs towards fish of all things doubtlessly resulted in many interpretation problems!

All in all, Ves had to manage his expectations.

"Lotteries are inherently fraught with uncertainty." He muttered. "Even if my intuition gives me the illusion of choice, absolute certainty doesn't exist! I'd only be deluding myself if I believe too much in my own judgement!"

He began to pull back from his obsessive need to overanalyze his selection of fish. Though it sounded like a bad idea, why not just narrow his selection to a bunch of fish that appeared useful to him and rely on his gut feeling to make the final choice?

"Whatever prize I'll draw through this method, I will not have any regrets!"

He calmly began to consider his needs and selected the most acute ones he wanted to address. Once he drew up a list of priorities, he began to study the eligible fish and noted ten that conformed to his demands.

Once he finished his selection of fish, he began to shift his gaze back and forth. All of them looked great for his situation. No matter which of the ten fish he caught, he shouldn't have much to complain about. A radiant lottery ticket was not for show!

"I've wasted enough time. I should just grab a fish."

He did not think any further on his choice and just stretched out his hand towards the pool of water. He randomly hovered his hand across the surface until it came close to one of the fishes in his selection.

Splash!

His hand instantly darted beneath the surface and grabbed hold of his targeted fish. As soon as he squeezed the slippery fellow in his fingers, he quickly pulled back his arm and put some distance between him and the pool in case he dropped the fish!

Soon after, he found out that his precaution wasn't needed as the fish instantly turned docile in his grasp. When he unfolded his fingers, he studied the fish he caught.

The fish resembled a small and slim herring. It glistened with a grayish reflective exterior but generally did not possess any large fins.

Ves licked his lips. "I wonder how it tastes. Can it be eaten raw?"

The fish abruptly exploded in a whoosh of confetti and festive smoke! In place of the herring-like fish, he instead held a vial containing a glowing liquid.

As he studied the object, he did not even notice his illusionary surroundings fading away. Now that he completed his prize draw, the System automatically deposited him back to the bathroom.

Lucky, who treated the washbowl like his bed, perked up a bit and glanced at Ves.

"Meow?"

Ves did not hear what his cat had meowed. His full attention was transfixed on the reward he received after the fish he caught had disappeared.

"...radiant lottery tickets are completely worth pursuing!"

If radiant lottery tickets continued to provide him with the opportunity to win prizes like these, then Ves eagerly wished to obtain more!

"System, will I win another radiant lottery ticket if I craft another masterwork mech?"

This time, the System answered immediately.

[Yes.]

Anytime the System responded to his inquiries, Ves knew it was important! The uncharacteristic lack of reserve on its part signified that the System strongly desired him to create more masterwork mechs!

The more he repeated his latest feat, the more he strengthened his affinity for mechs!

Still, that was asking a bit much from him. Despite turning his Devil Tiger into a masterwork mech, Ves did not delude himself that he'd be able to craft another masterwork mech on demand.

At the very least, he had to go above and beyond again and rely on serendipity to put him in the right condition to create another masterwork copy of his own designs.

He did realize one basic factor that affected his probability of forming another masterwork mech and thereby winning another radiant lottery ticket.

"The more I fabricate, the higher my chances that one of my mech becomes another masterwork."

In rare instances, professional fabricators who personally fabricated the same mech over and over again to the point where they knew its parameters by heart managed to form a masterwork mech.

Even if they hadn't been involved in designing the mech in the first place, they still entered this magical moment where they became unprecedentedly good!

These masterwork fabricators were highly sought after by every mech manufacturing company!

Ves reread the system description of the vial for the umpteenth time.

[Grand Dynamo Elixir]

Rank: Supreme

This ingestible elixir is a powerful substance that enhances the production rate of mental energy. This increase in production does not come with additional burdens, costs or negative repercussions aside from introducing a foreign substance in the mind.

Its name is derived from its effect. Upon consuming the elixir, the substance will accumulate in the mind and form a dynamo that is slightly sensitive to the vast forces being exerted by the closest galaxy.

If no galaxies are physically in proximity to the Grand Dynamo, it will cease all production.

"How powerful! Worthy of a supreme-ranked prize!"

The herring-like fish delivered something that suited one of his needs exceptionally well!

His most important priority right now was growing stronger. In order to do this, he had to design a lot of mechs.

However, as he thought about all of the new spiritual techniques he invented, he winced at the costs that some of them demanded. Some techniques such as spiritual restoration only worked if Ves invested at least some of his precious spiritual energy.

He might be able to bear the price if he designed a mech once every six months or something. If he wanted to be more productive, then he would likely bump into a very awful problem.

His turgid spiritual energy regenerated at the pace of a snail! His mind could only convert so much of his thoughts, emotions and other mind matter into spiritual energy!

Spiritual restoration was not the only technique he utilized over the course of his career.

Perhaps he wanted to empower an image with a substantial amount of spiritual energy in order to give it a lot of strength.

Perhaps he insisted on invading the spiritual presence of a notable creature or individual in the imaginary realm at all costs.

Perhaps he desired to form an incredibly strong spiritual barrier that could mask an enormously-powerful spiritual entity from detection!

"And this isn't all! The more spiritual techniques I come up with, the more I have to stretch my supply of spiritual energy!"

If he wanted to take advantage of all of his spiritual techniques, then he would quickly drain his mind until he turned into a bot in human skin! Yet if he waited until his lazy mind made up for his previous losses, months would have already passed!

To a mech designer who wanted to make the most of his time, this sluggish regeneration rate was unacceptable!

Before he won the Grand Dynamo Elixir, Ves only came up with one possible solution to increase his regeneration rate.

"Ordinarily, I should focus on raising my Spirituality Attribute, and the only way to do that is to progress my career and develop my design philosophy further."

However, a chicken-and-egg situation occurred where he wouldn't be able to progress his career quickly unless he designed more mechs.

To design more mechs, he needed to spend more spiritual energy.

To increase his budget of spiritual energy, he had to design more mechs.

While there was nothing improper about furthering this cycle by making the best out of his current circumstances, it was far too slow to his liking!

The more he delved into the possibilities his Spirituality opened up, the greater his greed. He had so many ideas in his mind, yet far too little spiritual energy to address more than a couple of them at a time!

The Grand Dynamo Elixir was like a welcome flood of rain after an enduring drought. It addressed one of his greatest shortcomings in a sustainable way.

"Unlike the Amastendira, the benefits of this elixir will remain with me in perpetuity!"

The two were both rated as supreme, but one was an object with a finite lifespan, while the other improved one of the most important functions of his mind.

The benefits of the Grand Dynamo Elixir couldn't be lost, broken or stolen! Unless someone invaded his mind and messed it up somehow, the spiritual dynamo would always serve as the goose that laid the golden eggs!

His grin grew wider. "I can't wait any longer! Bottom's up!"

Ves removed the stopper and instantly raised the open vial to his lips. A searing liquid poured along his tongue and dropped through his throat before entering the insides of his stomach!

As Ves tried his best not to spit out the contents of the vial due to its acid, burning taste, his stomach quickly transmitted a bloating sensation.

The elixir was taking effect!

Chapter 1443 The Galaxy Engine

"Meow!"

Ves momentarily collapsed on the toilet bowl seat. A searing heat churned in his stomach before the Grand Dynamo Elixir gradually blurred and phased through his stomach.

Then, it began to move upwards!

Within seconds, it had reached straight towards the edge of his mindspace.

Surprisingly, the barrier protecting his mind caused it to stop. Since the elixir kept searing his brains as it lingered in his head, Ves quickly lowered the defenses of his mind, allowing the elixir to enter without any hindrance.

The heat slowly faded as Ves no longer physically experienced the elixir.

"Who made this elixir?! Can't they make it easier?!"

As Ves recovered from the searing sensations branded onto his flesh, the Grand Dynamo Elixir began to settle into his mindspace. It occupied a space close to the center, not too far away from his design seed.

Already, the two began to interact in a strange fashion. The glowing hot elixir began to warp into a peculiar shape that reminded Ves of a machine in the form of glowing energy particles.

"This must be the dynamo!"

He noted that the dynamo and his design seed exchanged with each other. The meaning of this interaction quickly became evident as the dynamo started to assimilate some of his spiritual energy!

Parts of the dynamo's structure began to expand with the influx, making Ves feel as if the dynamo belonged to his mind!

His eyes widened!

"This.. the Grand Dynamo Elixir is a spiritual product!"

Not only that, but its complexity and sophistication vastly exceeded that of his own rudimentary attempt at creating a spiritual product!

He had blundered his way through the creation of Vescas from the ruins of the Dragon Cat's spirituality. His lack of knowledge and his dearth of theory prevented him from programming any aspects about his artificial spiritual entity.

If Ves was just a first year mech design student who had taken his first class on mech design, then the creator of the Grand Dynamo Elixir must have been the equivalent of a Master Mech Designer!

The disparity between their application of spiritual energy was just too vast!

An incredible insight struck him as he saw the dynamo starting to become more active.

"Spiritual energy can be manipulated just like any other matter or energy. Even though it abides by different rules, structure and order can still be imposed!"

Seeing the obvious mechanisms taking shape made it clear to Ves that the dynamo adopted its shape because it had been designed to do so! Someone or something deliberately developed the dynamo to serve a specific purpose.

Ves coined another term. A narrow glimpse of what was possible suddenly expanded into an open sea! He knew now that ever since he started developing his spiritual toolbox, he had already embarked on the road he now referred to as spiritual engineering!

"Just like physics, mechanics and mathematics, spiritual engineering is another field of science that I can utilize to design my mechs!"

The existence of the Grand Dynamo Elixir hinted to Ves that he was not the first individual to embark on the road of spiritual engineering.

Just like how Ves lived in a reality where Seniors, Masters and Star Designers loomed over his shoulders, there might be spiritual engineers out there whose applications were much more formidable!

As Ves began to consider which organization most likely harbored spiritual engineers, his face began to sour.

The System and everything it knew and possessed originally belonged to the only organization the galaxy that actively toyed with spirituality.

"The Five Scrolls Compact."

The more Ves delved into the secrets of spirituality, the more cult kept intertwining itself into his life. It made him feel as if Nitaa's sense of worship towards him became more and more justified when he progressed his application of spirituality further.

While Ves firmly considered himself a mech designer, his design philosophy was deeply intertwined with spiritual engineering. At this stage in his career, there was no way he could divest himself from this entanglement!

"It's like.. I'm tugging back and forth between the MTA and the Compact!"

He had a very clear idea on where he stood. He never possessed a strong sense of belonging to the MTA to begin with, and as he began to harbor more secrets, he diverged more and more from their principles and aims.

Instead, as uncomfortable as it sounded, he slowly aligned himself with the Compact.

Oh, he didn't delude himself that he would ever become a full-blown card-carrying brother of the Compact. However, he was faintly aware that some of his attitudes and approaches weren't very unusual among their kind.

Ves had something in common with both organizations, but because he dabbled with each other's archenemies, he never fully belonged to one or the other.

A rueful laugh escaped from his mouth as the dynamo in his mind began to become more active.

"I'm both a mech designer and a Holy Son. Yet I can never trust the MTA nor the Compact!"

He stood completely alone!

If either of them realized the extent of his secrets, they would not hesitate to deprive him of his advantages!

However, this was the road he had chosen for himself. Even if the actions of his parents and the proddings of the System pushed him into it, Ves fully embraced the direction he had taken in his life.

There was no turning back!

At this time of contemplation, the dynamo finally assimilated and shaped his spiritual energy into its structure.

As its mechanisms removed the final restraints, the supreme-quality spiritual product began to fulfill its function.

"A dynamo is a generator of energy. It converts one form of energy into another form of energy."

Though simple and primitive, that did not detract from its utility. Numerous engineers still applied dynamos in all kinds of energy-conversion applications.

Ves could easily build a basic dynamo that converted the energy from a spinning wheel into a weak electric current.

When he compared the basic dynamo he imagined in his mind to the Grand Dynamo that fully took shape in his mind, the differences were too vast, yet their fundamental principles still remained the same!

The Grand Dynamo slowly started to unleash a trickle of spiritual energy.

That trickle quickly turned into a stream, then ramped up into a flood in a matter of minutes!

The most remarkable aspect about the output of the Grand Dynamo was that the spiritual energy it churned out completely conformed to his attributes!

It was as if the output of the Grand Dynamo was an intrinsic part of his mind! No sense of foreignness emanated from it at all, as its entire structure bore his spiritual imprint from top to bottom!

The flood of spiritual energy the Grand Dynamo generated became more and more alarming to Ves. Its output vastly outpaced his natural spiritual energy regeneration!

"What force is acting on it to produce all of this spiritual energy?!"

He recalled the description of the Grand Dynamo Elixir. Though he did not sense any hint of it, he never had the sense that the System lied about anything.

It withheld information, yes, but when it spoke, it always strove to be accurate!

"Is the Grand Dynamo truly being powered by the forces of the galaxy?" He breathed deeply.

He could not even begin to understand the engineering behind it all! The biggest spinning wheel in the galaxy was the galaxy itself! As an enormous disk of gasses, stars, black holes and other astral junk, the forces keeping it spinning was incredibly humongous!

For the Grand Dynamo to siphon an extremely miniscule portion of these vast forces and convert them into usable spiritual energy was incredible! Only the equivalent of a Master or a Star Designer in spiritual engineering could have conceived of such an amazing application!

Ves became inspired after witnessing the supreme spiritual product fulfill its purpose!

"This is what the highest minds are engaged in! Their abilities are lofty, but their vision is loftier! Grand designs are the summit of a creator's work!"

Those at the very top of their professions were capable of performing unimaginable feats! They frequently engineered miracles on demand!

Only now did Ves fully appreciate the worth of the Grand Dynamo Elixir. The supreme-ranked reward did not disgrace its eminent classification!

The System was generous to its owner as long as he continued to excel in his profession!

After ten more minutes of ramping up and other adjustments, the Grand Dynamo finally achieved stability. Its output no longer fluctuated or sputtered but instead formed a stable river of spiritual energy.

The modest deficit of spiritual energy in his mind was being rapidly filled up! As Ves studied the output of the Grand Dynamo and tracked how fast his mental capacity began to fill up, he quickly estimated his new rate of replenishment.

His eyes widened at his estimated results.

"Before.. it would have taken an entire year for me to replenish my entire spiritual energy reserves. Now, I just need twenty days to fill up my entire tank!"

The Grand Dynamo's output greatly surpassed what he imagined! The sheer difference between the natural regeneration of his mind and the Grand Dynamo's workings was far too vast!

"The difference in production is as vast as the difference in might between a human and a mech!"

A human could never beat a mech in single combat! Ves knew this lesson very well!

As for the Grand Dynamo, Ves in his current state wasn't able to match its enormous output!

However... what about the future? How powerful was the mind of a Senior? Or a Master?

Those who just broke through the extraordinary threshold were only at the starting point of a very long climb. Those who advanced higher became exponentially stronger.

"It's not ludicrous to imagine that a Master or a Star Designer can easily match or exceed the output of my Grand Dynamo!"

The value of the Grand Dynamo was proportional to the spiritual strength of its user. To someone who only recently became a Journeyman like Ves, the supreme spiritual product was a godsend!

As for those who stood at the summit of the galaxy, the Grand Dynamo was just a supplement at best.

Ves shrugged. "Even if the Grand Dynamo isn't as useful a century from now, that is in the future. Right now, this is exactly what I need to supercharge my progression!"

The abundance of spiritual energy welling in his mind made him incredibly excited! He could do so much with a deluge of spiritual energy!

"Spiritual energy is like a currency that I can spend on improving my mech designs! The greater my income, the more I can afford to spend!"

Even now, his mind quickly reached its saturation point! It could no longer accommodate any more spiritual energy!

Ves keenly watched what happened next. Upon finding out that his mind was chock-full of spiritual energy, the Grand Dynamo abruptly cut off its output! Some kind of internal mechanism completely disconnected its conversion mechanisms from the forces of the galaxy.

The instant reaction made Ves relieved. For a moment, he was afraid that he might leak out his excess spiritual energy from his mind or cause it to compress into a dangerously explosive concentration!

However, seeing the Grand Dynamo becoming inert quickly began to chafe at Ves. Letting this extremely valuable spiritual energy generator go to sleep was a massive waste!

He had to kick it back to work!

"Come on, Lucky!"

Ves grabbed his cat from the wash bowl and quickly exited the bathroom. As he reentered the bedroom, he grabbed the box that stored his first P-stone.

He did something that he never would have imagined doing before. He quickly dumped a fifth of his entire spiritual energy reserves into his P-stone!

"Yes! Suck it all in! Be a good little rock and accept your fate as my piggy bank!"

Upon absorbing so much of his spiritual energy, the grey P-stone to gain a lot more spiritual weight in his senses! He determined that his P-stone had not come close to reaching its capacity yet, which was good news! The more

excess spiritual energy he stored, the more he could spend at critical moments!

It was as if Ves had started off as a spiritual pauper, but suddenly landed a job that elevated him into a spiritual millionaire! The sudden promotion made him dizzy with all of the potential ways he could spend his new riches!

Chapter 1444 Spiritual Energy Sink

While Ves wanted to celebrate his new gains even further, he had better things to do with his time.

"I have to keep moving forward." Ves patted his cheeks as if to arouse himself from his excessive gloating. "Indulging in celebration before the race is over is a cardinal sin!"

Recognizing his small successes raised his morale and strengthened his motivation. Yet they seemed trivial compared to the daunting challenges he faced in the future.

He was nowhere close to fulfilling any of his major goals!

Once he fully reined in his excitement and sobered himself up, he began to take stock of his current agenda.

Soon, he and his followers would depart to Cinach XIII, where he planned to enter a hidden marketplace set up by the mysterious Circle of Mota.

There, Ves hoped to find a customer for his Devil Tiger. As a masterwork mech, there was no way for his tiger mech to remain obscure!

"If their mech appraisers have any sense, they'll treat my mech with utmost importance!"

He knew that if he arrived at the Circle with a genuine masterwork mech on offer, he would doubtlessly receive generous treatment! Perhaps the Circle

would even be willing to change his temporary access pass into a permanent access pass!

"I might even be able to sell the Devil Tiger at a profit!"

The allure of masterwork mechs were simply that immense! Many Seniors were only capable of fabricating five masterwork mechs at most over the course of their centuries-long life. This fully emphasized the rarity of such masterpieces!

In addition, the selling price of a masterwork mech shot up drastically according to the strength of its performance.

After all, if some fabricator somehow managed to turn a cheap frontline mech into a masterwork copy, then its value still did not impress. At most, it might be sold for ten times its original cost, which would still make it cheaper than a typical Blackbeak!

It was a completely different story when it came to premium mechs or custom mechs.

The performance of the Devil Tiger may not have caught up with its prohibitive cost, but it still stood far above the level of most third-class mechs!

Now that it became a masterwork mech, its actual value may have even exceeded the price of a typical second-class mech!

Ves saw hope in recouping a substantial portion of the monetary investment he put into realizing the mech. He always felt uncomfortable about the fact that he had to beg an expensive favor from his girlfriend.

While Gloriana did not make a big deal about the pure ASMAS she gifted to him, Ves knew that she must have made a substantial sacrifice to get her hands on something that expensive.

There was no way that Gloriana had reached the point where she could easily afford to purchase a batch of pure ASMAS out of her own pocket!

Even if Ves was unable to earn back the total worth of the pure ASMAS from selling the Devil Tiger, he could at least ease his guilt by paying back what he could to Gloriana after he completed the transaction.

"As for the rest... I can slowly whittle that sum down in the future."

He knew that Gloriana did not necessarily expect him to repay her. Yet Ves still insisted on doing so. He suspected that the main reason why Gloriana was so generous was due to her Hexer upbringing.

To her, men needed to be coddled! Men couldn't take care of themselves! Men were supposed to be dependent on women!

Ves hated being treated like a manchild!

He furiously held up Lucky in front of his face. "I can take care of myself, right!?"

"Meow."

"What do you mean? That's not true! I can be independent! I can stand up for myself just fine! Just you wait, Lucky! Next time I meet Gloriana, I'll show her what a true man looks like!"

"Meow!"

Though his cat expressed some doubts, Ves paid no mind to them. Now that he augmented his spiritual engineering capabilities with the Grand Dynamo, he felt much more confident that he could surpass Gloriana and advance to Senior faster!

"She better watch out because I'm not going to slow down!"

His progression depended on the availability of at least five scarce resources.

Time.

Money.

Materials.

Tech.

Spiritual energy.

Every mech designer depended on each of these five resources, though they probably called the last one psionic energy or something.

The point was that mech designers had two ways of increasing their productivity. They could make more efficient use of the resources they already had access to, or expand their supply of resources!

Why did mech designers work so hard to earn the merits to redeem expensive life-prolonging treatments from the MTA? It was all about expanding the amount of time they had at their disposal!

The more years they lived, the more mechs they designed and the more research they conducted!

Ves stood out from other mech designers in that he made much more vigorous use of his spirituality.

So far, he suspected that most mech designers weren't able to observe or manipulate their psionic power as extensively as him. As a result, they never utilized their psionic energy as extensively either!

Only Ves was capable of spending his spiritual energy in such a profligate manner!

Unfortunately, the biggest downside to this was that Ves suffered a problem that most mech designers didn't have to deal with, which was that he was spending his spiritual energy way too quickly!

He already suffered the drawbacks from a dearth of spiritual energy in his mind, and he did not wish to repeat this deprivation.

This was why he valued the Grand Dynamo so much. Its prodigious production rate, seemingly without any cost to his own physical or mental health, conveniently solved his greatest bottleneck that prevented him from designing more fantastic mechs!

In fact, Ves lamented the Grand Dynamo's incredible output because he didn't have enough P-stones to store all of the excess spiritual energy!

It was as if he was celebrating the arrival of a torrent of rain, but only possessed two buckets to store the water for later!

If he wanted to make efficient use of his Grand Dynamo, then he needed to find some sort of spiritual energy sink in which he could convert unneeded spiritual energy into something useful.

"I have plenty of time to figure something out." He muttered. "I've experienced enough excitement for one day."

He decided to call it a day and sleep over it. He always regained a clearer mind after he enjoyed a good rest.

After checking in with Nitaa to reassure her that he hadn't gone mad or anything with his abnormal behavior, he changed to his pajamas and settled comfortably in his bed.

He hugged Lucky against his chest and quickly dozed off despite the rush of activity taking place in his mind.

Whether he was awake or asleep, the Grand Dynamo kept churning out more spiritual energy, all of which fully bore his imprint as well as his unique mixture of spiritual attributes!

As Ves woke up, he realized that the morning hadn't dawned as of yet on Cinach XII.

The bedroom was still as dark as ever, with just a sliver of night from the city glowing from the windows that had taken on an opaque tint.

Lucky wasn't anywhere near his body either. He knew his cat liked to wake in the middle of the night and rummage around, but he would never be too far away.

"Lucky?"

A faint pressure started pressing onto his mind and Spirituality. The sensation faintly reminded him of something. As Ves swiveled his head toward the direction of the pressure, it quickly grew stronger.

"Lucky! What are you doing!?"

Ves could faintly make out his pet being petted by a translucent figure! The intruder, for the person was far too short to be Nitaa, affectionately scratched Lucky's cheeks.

There were several women he could think of who treated Lucky in this fashion.

He doubted that Ketis left the Bright Republic and traveled all the way to the Sentinel Kingdom in order to pamper Lucky.

The only other alternative was...

"Mother!" He hissed in alarm! "What are you doing here!?"

The ghostly form that bore a very familiar face directed a motherly smile at him. The spirituality that Ves sensed from the incorporeal intruder flared with happiness as well!

"Ves." She spoke, her voice so achingly familiar to his childhood memories. "I missed you, you know. Your father misses you as well. When I found out that you were passing through the Sentinel Kingdom, I couldn't resist sneaking in to pay you a visit! I deeply regret missing your birthday, so I'm making it up to you today!"

Ves pressed his lips and shuffled back on his bed as his mother gazed at him with an unnerving stare.

"You didn't have to. I'm grown-up now. I have my own life. I think you're better off staying wherever you disappeared to. Wait a minute.. what are you doing? Stay back! Don't come closer!"

His mother stopped petting Lucky and began to drift closer to Ves. The pressure exerting upon Ves grew greater as she did so, so much so that Ves now widened his eyes in alarm at the realization why it felt so familiar!

His mother was draining him again! He could feel a trickle of his spiritual energy already bleeding out of his mind and entering his mother's ghostly form!

Worse yet, as the distance grew smaller, the drain on his spiritual energy increased!

"What are you doing! What kind of mother sucks his own son's energy?!"

His mother responded with an intrigued smile. "Mommy needs a little pick-me-up. Now that you're a grown-up, you wouldn't be so petty as to deprive the person who raised you some assistance, would you?"

"That wasn't what I meant! Stop stealing my spiritual energy!"

She ignored his complaints. "You've grown, Ves. It was just a short time ago when you were just in your infancy. Now, not only did you turn into a handsome Journeyman Mech Designer, but you've also managed to earn the

appreciation of your father's gift. I can sense a powerful source inside your mind. Be a good dear and share some of your bounty!\

His mother's face turned rapturous as she unilaterally yanked half of his current spiritual energy in her ghostly body! It visibly grew stronger and more defined!

As for Ves, the drain was so sudden and abrupt that Ves suffered a disconcerting loss of strength! His body almost flopped down onto his bed as he struggled to adjust to the changes!

\\"Give it back, mother!\" He squeezed out through his gritted teeth. \\"It's mine! You have no right to take my energy!\"

As his mother came off her vampiric high, she smiled contently at Ves. \\"Don't be selfish, boy. Do you think I borrowed your strength because I am greedy for power? No! All this time, I've stayed at the side of your father in the Nyxian Gap, helping him navigate the murky, pirate-infested environment! It's difficult, you know. If not for my help, I doubt your father would have been able to thrive so much!\"

The mention of his father startled Ves. \\"Dad is still alive and okay?\"

\\"Yes. He misses you so much, you know. While your father is capable enough to stay a step ahead from his pursuers in the Nyxian Gap, with my help he was able to grasp some power and secure more solid footing for himself! The reason why I've been able to do so is because of your help. Each time you strengthen me, you are helping out your father even further! Do you feel so upset about my actions now?\"

Though Ves still felt cross, he also believed her words.

\\"You could have explained all of that before you started taking my spiritual energy, you know.\" He grumpily responded.

His mother was insufferable!

Chapter 1445 Black Circles

Before his mother continued to talk, her translucent body began to shift and compress in on itself.

Ves finally noted the miniature, hand-sized body floating within the center of her ghostly form.

That was the crystal builder leader's body! It was something his mother had seized from his possession several years ago!

Though his mother had molded its crystalline makeup into a vague feminine shape that conformed to her own appearance, she couldn't do anything about its diminutive stature.

She made the best out of her situation by donning it with a colorful red robe. Its traditional fashion greatly enhanced her elegance and added some much needed stature to her tiny form.

Once his mother fully retracted her exposed spirituality into the crystalline body, the pressure around her disappeared. Like a closed box, the crystal builder leader's body fully restrained her aura and other side effects from her unusual spiritual form!

"Ah, that's better!" She sighed in pleasure. "Since you've grown to this point, I'm sure you know that taking on my form is unsustainable. I'm truly thankful for this container you've managed to scrounge up. I wouldn't nearly have been able to exert as much help to your father without such a suitable body!"

Ves grimaced at her words. Each time his mother mentioned something about helping his father, he no longer dared to raise his voice in protest.

He really cared about his father! He did not want to mess up by resisting his mother's attempts at grabbing his stuff, even if he hated it every step of the way!

"Is this all?" He asked with a sulk.

The tiny crystalline form offered another motherly smile to Ves. "Oh, not at all! I told you that I came to celebrate your birthday, and I meant it! Your father and I even pooled together to prepare your birthday gift!"

"A birthday gift? For me? Really?"

It was as if Ves couldn't fathom his mother giving anything to him. Most of the time, it was him who passed on his stuff to her! To find out that her mother actually wanted to gift him for once sounded alien!

"Our situation is a bit better now." She said, as if reading his thoughts from his troubled expression. "Whatever you think of us, we are still your parents. We love you and we wish you the best."

Though Ves always maintained a sliver of doubt whether she was actually his mother or not, his intuition told him that she spoke the truth. She hadn't uttered any lies since she appeared!

He shoved aside his doubts about her identity and just accepted that the ghost that occupied the crystal builder leader's body was truly her mother. By now, he didn't want to contemplate the alternative.

He sighed. "Alright. What did you get for me, mom?"

Once he recovered from his abrupt loss of spiritual energy, he stabilized his mood. In any case, it wasn't as if his mother had taken something indispensable. He estimated he could easily replenish what he lost within a couple of weeks.

Knowing his mother, it was pointless to do anything else except to go along with her arrangements.

Her body floated over to a nearby table, where she picked up a box tied with a colorful ribbon bowtie the size of her own body. Once she lifted it up, she floated towards Ves and dropped it in her hands.

"Here you go! Open it up!"

His mother grinned with anticipation and the excitement of a teenager as Ves tentatively pulled the ribbon and opened his present.

"These are.. a pair of rings?"

"Yes! As you've said, you've grown up, Ves. You're at the point in your life where you should seek to share your life with someone else. When I caught up on what you were up to these days, I heard the loveliest piece of news. Is it true that you have a girlfriend now?!"

"...Yes?"

"Wonderful! Gloriana sounds like a good catch. Whether you want to tie the knot with her or not, I support your choice. I just hope you have some consideration for your poor old parents marry someone before we grow old and senile! I want to hold my grandkids one day!"

Oh, god. Not her too. Ves palmed his face in exasperation. "Gloriana and I just know each other. It's way too soon to think of marriage!"

"You don't have to use our gift immediately! The rings are special. Just save them up for when you are sure you want to spend the rest of your life with the woman you love. If your tastes run different and you have a liking for men or something, I won't mind. I'm open-minded and with all of the procreation tech these days—"

"—AHEM." Ves loudly interrupted his caught-up mother. "You don't have to worry about which direction I swing. Besides, these rings.. no offense, mom, but don't they look a little bit plain?"

Traditional wedding rings usually consisted of platinum on the cheaper end and varying grades of exotics at the more expensive end.

While Ves failed to recognize the materials of the pair of rings that his mother had gifted him, their matte black appearance looked extremely underwhelming. In fact, they differed from something made of cheap carbon!

"As I've stated, Ves, they're special." She smiled intriguingly at him. "I'll leave it up to you to discover its secrets. Know that it carries the love of both your father and I. Besides, the rings are plain for a reason. Since you're a mech designer, I'm sure you can decorate it according to your tastes. Don't you think it's great if you add in your own design to the physical proof of your bond with one another?"

He had to admit, that sounded very appealing to Ves. Not that he contemplated proposing to Gloriana or anyone else anytime soon. He had time to wait, his mother's urging be damned.

"Thank you.. mother. Your present is very thoughtful."

Lucky climbed up on the bed and stared up at the tiny form of his mother. Despite being large enough to bite his mother's crystalline body in half if he pounced on her, the cat mewled like a kitten in her presence.

Ves looked scandalized at his pet. Lucky never acted to subservient to him! Who was his true owner here?!

"Lucky! Come over here, buddy!"

His cat acted like he didn't exist! The cat comfortably curled up below his mother's floating miniature form.

His mother snapped her tiny fingers. "My time is short, Ves. As much as I'd like to stay, I have to leave soon."

"Why?" He whined, even though a part of him already celebrated at the thought of his mother's departure!

"I'm being hunted. I think you know who."

"The Compact?"

"Don't mention that name!" She furiously hissed. "You are dabbling with forces you cannot possibly fathom!"

Ves crossed his arms across his chest. "I think you owe me some answers, mom. I've already brushed with the Compact several times. I've also learned some very explosive details."

Her tiny face soured. "I never wanted you to get entangled with your ilk. Your father didn't want you to get involved either. It's why he dropped everything in the Bright Republic and went into hiding. He wanted to minimize any possibility that you'd enter their view.."

"I think it's too late for that. Please answer me. Is the System my father gifted me the so-called Metal Scroll? Are you tied to the Five Scrolls Compact in any way?"

The air between them grew incredibly grave once he asked his questions. He noted that his mother emanated a subtle field that reminded him of a jamming field ever since she appeared, so he did not hold his curiosity back.

"Ves.. you are asking questions that I can't answer." She shook her head.

"Some things just aren't meant to be spoken aloud."

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Are you under a compulsion or something?"

Her lack of answer was an answer in itself. Ves understood that she'd been subjected to some sort of restriction that limited what she could do. Whether

she truly couldn't say anything or simply wanted to keep Ves in the dark, he couldn't make up his mind.

He had the feeling that his mother wanted him to know as little as possible, and that frustrated him a lot!

"Do you know about the envoy of the Ruined Temple secretly making his way to the Five Scrolls Compact branch hidden in the Nyxian Gap?"

This time, she lost her composure. She genuinely looked alarmed! "What?! Where did you hear this? How reliable is your information?!"

Ves pointed towards the crumpled heap of his bodyguard resting at the opposite side of the room. His mother probably knocked Nitaa unconscious with one of her tricks.

"My bodyguard used to be a former member of one of the Compact's splinter organizations. Though she only heard some rumors, I think she is definitely on to something. Supposedly, the high dignitary from the Ruined Temple has been underway for a while and will arrive at the Nyxian Gap in a decade or so. I'm not too sure!"

The news really shocked his mother. A short pause ensued as she processed the new information. Her face scrunched up in determination.

"I see. I'll perform my own investigations. What you've claimed is extremely important! If it turns out to be true, then the forewarning you've passed on is extremely crucial! What are your plans in the event it's true?"

"I already came up with a plan, and even got my girlfriend on board..."

Ves briefly explained his intentions to go on a grand expedition. His mother listened with rapt attention and eventually nodded.

"That's very wise. Even if your precaution turns out to be excessive, it's still a good idea to stay as far away from anyone who claims to be from that accursed Temple!"

"What about my father and you? What will the two of you do?"

"Don't worry about us. We are more than capable of taking care of ourselves. We don't want to entangle you any further in our difficulties. Our burdens are our own to bear. The best way you can make us happy is to live a good life and start a family. We don't want any further help from you. The more you try to help us, the more you risk getting caught up in our problems."

Ves argued a bit with his mother about this. He really did not feel comfortable living a blissful, ignorant life while knowing that his parents might be drowning in the Nyxian Gap.

However, his mother strongly insisted on drawing a very firm line between them. The sins of the parents should start and end with them! Ves ought to keep his nose out of their problems.

"Look, even if you want to help us, there is nothing you can do." His mother shook her head as she placed her tiny hands against her hips. "I have to go, Ves. The longer I linger, the greater the risk of exposure. I'm constantly being tracked. It's the main reason I don't dare to spend more time with you, even though I miss you immensely."

Both his mother and Ves looked sad at that. He still had so many more questions to ask. How many more years did he have to live in ignorance of what his parents had done to obtain the Mech Designer System and provoke the Compact?

"Can you leave me a comm address or something so that I can continue to talk to you? It's really frustrating to me that I haven't spoken to my dad in five years!"

The tiny form shook her head. "I'm sorry, Ves. The galactic net is one of the least secure means of communications. Any method of communication presents a risk. We only have to slip up once for us to meet our ends. I can't subject you to the risk of such a disaster!"

For a moment, Ves felt a bit weird. Did he get his paranoia from his mother? Because that sounded exactly like something he would say!

In the end, after a brief chat where his mother continued to say little of substance, she finally bid farewell and phased out of his hotel room.

Ves had no idea when he would be able to talk or meet with his mother again, and that realization saddened him in a very profound way.

"Will I ever obtain the answers I want?"

Chapter 1446 Reaching Maturity

After his mother disappeared, Ves fell silent for a time.

Eventually, he directed his attention to Lucky, who appeared completely relaxed as he snoozed without a care in the world.

"You're so unreliable. Who do you really look up to, me or my mother?"

He knew there was no use putting some sense in his cat, so he instead climbed out of his bed and moved over to the collapsed form of his bodyguard.

Though it unnerved him a bit to sleep while she remained on guard within his room, he felt better if there was someone in the room to react against unauthorized intrusions.

His mother's casual intrusion into his hotel room vindicated his decision. Yet her very appearance also proved that two of his most trusted guards, namely Nitaa and Lucky, weren't capable of fending off against every intruder!

Ves kicked Nitaa's body. She remained out cold. "How did mother manage to do this?"

The more he met his mother, the more it became clear that she possessed a much greater mastery of spiritual techniques. He would have loved to learn how to prod someone unconscious by leveraging his Spirituality in a certain way.

"That's another thing my mother didn't teach me." He grimaced.

Rather than gift him a pair of incomplete wedding rings, he would rather receive a manual on spiritual power! Why didn't she give him that instead?! Was she afraid of the Five Scrolls Compact's copyright police or something?!

Above all else, his was anything but forthcoming about her past, her difficulties and her secrets. Her silence on the questions simmering in his mind frustrated him to no end!

Ves also realized that he and his mother had more things in common than he thought. It wasn't as if he'd been generous with his secrets towards his closest companions either, and he didn't plan to change that anytime soon.

Nitaa and Calabast may know a bit more about him than he was comfortable with, but that was because they found out his secrets outside of his control.

"Secrets... they're great if you can keep them, but awful if someone else withholds them from you." He depressingly mused. "I hate being on the other end."

If his mother was anything like himself, then he shouldn't be surprised that she would want to keep him out of her orbit. At his current state, he could hardly be of assistance to her besides from acting as her spiritual energy battery.

"What is up with that?" He frowned.

He tried observing her with his spiritual senses and spiritual vision. He encountered nothing but walls that hindered him assessing her true spiritual state.

Yet normally, mothers didn't drain the vigor of their sons. So what compelled her to steal his spiritual energy as if he was a smoothie?

"Is there a problem with her spiritual state?"

If Ves assumed that his mother truly died but managed to retain a sliver of life as a ghost or something, then she may not have come back to life unscathed.

The evidence strongly pointed towards a deficiency of some sorts. Perhaps she lost her capability to replenish her spiritual energy, thereby making her dependent on external sources to maintain a healthy level of spiritual strength.

"There's always a price." He whispered. "The greater the benefit, the greater the price. I'd imagine clawing yourself out of the maws of death must be a very expensive price indeed."

He became a bit concerned about her dependence on the crystal builder leader's body. Though she made his body her own, he doubted that the crystalline body provided her with the right conditions to bring her back to life.

Ves wondered if he could give her a better body by designing one on his own. Human size, of course.

"I doubt my mother wants to become a mech in her second life." He muttered.

All of this was largely moot since his mother did not wish to impose on him. She abundantly made it clear that she wished him to live his own life away from the entanglements that continued to tie down his father and his mother.

For now, he had no choice but to go along with their arrangements. Hopefully, that would be different one day, but that was very far away.

"She really has a point." He closed his eyes. "The best way for me to go forward is to keep my head down and progress in the background. I'll only endanger myself if I try to get involved."

Ves had the sense that his parents were even willing to die in some forgotten place in the Nyxian Gap if that was what it took to cut off further pursuit! This was their true love towards him. They unhesitatingly placed his own wellbeing above their own!

Once dawn began to break, Nitaa slowly awoke from her forced sleep. She immediately realized that she'd been taken out!

If not for Ves leisurely enjoying his breakfast in his room, she would have gone crazy!

"My apologies, sir! I was derelict with my duties!"

"It's not a big deal, Nitaa. The person who came into my room was.. not easy to deal with. She's friendly though, so nothing happened to me. I still have Lucky to protect me, so I was never completely left alone."

Nothing serious happened to him except for losing half of his spiritual energy reserves. Ves had already retrieved the excess spiritual energy he previously dumped into his P-stone, but he still felt a bit lethargic and in no mood to design a mech anytime soon!

Fortunately, with his Grand Dynamo working at full tilt, the temporary shortfall no longer weighed on him as much as it used to. Where he previously needed months or years to recover his losses, now he'd be as good as new in less than two weeks.

"Sir.. it was still unforgivable of me to fail you in such an abject way."

"As I've said, it's not your fault. You can't defend against the method of attack the guest employed. We are but humans, and humans have failings."

"It's unacceptable!"

It took some time for him to stop Nitaa from apologizing to him. She really took her failings seriously, and even if she no longer expressed her regret, her eyes still looked troubled.

Ves decided to throw her a bone in order to drag her out of her cycle of self-blame.

"Look, if you want to do better, then focus on training your mind. I know you spend a lot of effort on keeping your body fit, but you shouldn't neglect the growth of your mind. If you develop a strong will and unswervingly follow a set of principles, then I doubt you'd be as susceptible to the attack that knocked you out."

She looked doubtful at him. "Will that really help?"

"Expert pilots are regularly known for these qualities. They are exceptional mainly because of their strong mental conviction and resilience."

That put her to thought, as Ves intended to. Unlike most people, Nitaa possessed spiritual potential.

Even if she wasn't a mech pilot or mech designer, Ves still believed that she would acquire something useful if she somehow managed to develop her spiritual potential to the point where she broke through the extraordinary threshold.

He even believed that this might be the key to unlocking the full potential of her experimental nose. The Five Scrolls Compact must have their reasons to pour their research into such an odd augmentation.

With all the excitement that went on, Ves welcomed a return to normality when Gavin made his daily report on his business operations.

"How are the Avatars of Myth faring these days?"

"Quite well, boss. Nothing serious of note has happened. Commander Melkor sounds increasingly more confident about the readiness of the Avatars under his command. The cadre that he focused on nurturing first are completely integrated by now. They're loyal, skilled and committed to the Avatars. This opens up your mech troop for faster expansion, because as long as there is a sufficient amount of cadre in place in the new units, we don't have to fear any disloyalty."

"How many mechs can we currently field?"

"Commander Melkor assured me that he can immediately field two landbound and two spaceborn mech companies. There are an abundant number of spare mech pilots on hand to ensure that all 160 mechs are ready to deploy at any moment. Though the budget of the Avatars has ballooned as well, for now the LMC can easily bear the burden."

That was good news. The growth of the Avatars had been far too slow for his liking. Hearing that they possessed more leeway now that they formed a strong core of loyalists eased his worries for his private mech force.

"This only counts for our mech companies, right? What about our guard infantry and virtual security contingents?"

"They've shapen up as well under the lead of Captain Coyin Larkinson. In order to accelerate the growth of the guard infantry companies and the virtual security department, Coyin has reached out to other Larkinsons as well as their extensive list of contacts. A considerable number of military veterans have bolstered their ranks."

This did not sound as good to Ves. When he embarked on his grand expedition, he wanted to bring an adequate number of Avatars with him in for protection.

If most Avatars consisted of veterans with a strong attachment to the Bright Republic, then Ves doubted that more than twenty percent of them would agree to leaving their home state!

In fact, the same problem applied to the mech contingent as well. So long as they remained attached to the Bright Republic and their families who resided there, there was no way for Ves to employ them as freely as he wished!

Ves began to develop some ideas to address this problem, but he would wait until he finished his current tour before discussing them with Melkor.

"How is the LMC?" He asked, changing the topic.

"The same. The LMC's considerable growth over the last few months has slowed down by now. While we are still selling more and more mechs, this is mostly due to expanding our reach into more distant markets. In the Bright Republic, our sales have completely plateaued. All of the side projects you've spent your time on lately hasn't done the LMC's mech catalog any favors. In addition, the controversy that has developed around your mech models has really started to pick up steam."

"Ah, yes. The controversy." Ves grimaced. "Have the LMC's attempts to deflect the criticism been effective?"

"No." He said. "We don't really have a dependable spokesperson who can speak to the public on the company's behalf. While Professor Ventag has spoken up in your favor, the Ansel guys are doing everything they can to foster the rumors about the potentially dangerous effects of your mechs."

BANG!

"My mechs aren't brainwashing anyone!" Ves slammed his fist against the table. "These rumors are ridiculous! My customers just love my products when they begin to use them, that's all!"

"We all believe you. The conspiracy theories completely neglect the fact that the MTA always certifies our mechs! If the LMC's products truly pose a threat to the minds of our customers, then we would have never been allowed to bring them to market! There's no way we can argue against those who aren't open to facts and logic!"

Ves understood that his business rivals finally found a way to impair his business success. It got to the point where their chosen attack strategy seriously posed a threat to his reputation and the reputation of his company.

"What can we do to halt the rumors?"

"For a start, you could return home and address the concerns of the public. There's not much you can do besides that. Haters are always going to hate. Don't forget that the LMC has developed a small but dedicated fanbase. Word of mouth has always been favorable for us. Our growth may be hampered, but we aren't in any risk of dropping off from the face of the galaxy."

That sounded far from ideal, but Ves understood that barring some exceptional circumstances, this might become the new normal.

The only way he could break this deadlock was if he came up with something explosive that forcibly rearranged the current landscape of his company.

Publishing a number of fantastic new mech designs ought to do the job.

Chapter 1447 No Disclosure

Once Ves finished his morning routine, he was ready to depart from the planet. Gavin already booked transit to Cinach VIII.

He mainly intended to go there to gain entry to the temporary marketplace set up by the Circle of Mota.

However, it would be rather inconspicuous if he traveled all the way to Cinach VIII only to spend his time in a hotel all the time.

For this reason, he added another goal to his trip. He intended to visit one of the Sentinel Kingdom's renowned mech universities and see if he could fish some benefits.

"Benny." He spoke as he got ready by donning the Pride of Dusk's overcoat over his casual business attire. There was no need for him to try too hard in dressing himself up for a simple interplanetary transit ride. "Have any of the mech design universities responded to our request to visit their premises as a guest?"

"The responses have been quite good, boss. A number of them are even willing to host you and show you some of their research in exchange for giving a guest lecture."

Ves frowned as he placed his soft, fluffy decorative cat ears over his head. Because why not?

"Guest lecture?"

"Yeah. The professors want you to speak in front of a class of mech design students for at least two hours."

"What do they want me to talk about?"

"As far as I know, they want you to impart some of your experiences to the students. In particular, they want the students to get a more practical impression of the life of a mech designer who leads their own business. Personally, I think you'd do great. You should consider the offers. I think they are really sincere since they value you for your rapid advancement to Journeyman. You're an example to all of the students."

Though Ves felt flattered by the praise, he knew that the only reason he shot up so quickly was due to his hidden advantages. There was no way he could set himself up as a responsible role model to the impressionable mech design students.

He shook his head. "I'm thankful for the offers, but I respectfully decline. I don't think I'm suitable to lecture about my career trajectory to the students."

"Why not?" Gavin frowned. "You're a great mech designer! Sure, your life is anything but normal, but that's what makes it so exciting! In addition, guest lecturing will do wonders for your personal and professional brands. By accepting you as a guest lecturer for a day, the university in question essentially lends some of their credibility to you. That's vital in painting your reputation in a better light and rub away some of the stains it acquired!"

That put Ves to pause. He and his company did suffer quite a bit from the accusations that their products brainwashed their customers.

Giving a guest lecture or two did not do anything to lessen the spread of rumors, but it would doubtlessly help in blunting the negativity.

Building up his credibility as a mech designer essentially granted him an invisible suit of armor that was exceptionally suitable to deflect these kinds of attacks.

"Give me a list of offers." Ves stretched out his hand. "I want to see which institutions value me to such an extent that they're willing to put me in front of a class of promising students."

Cinach VIII hosted a lot of universities and educational institutions. Not all of them taught mech design. Only four universities sent him an offer to give a guest lecture, and only a single one of them was highly acclaimed.

"The Rawlings University is one of the best mech design universities in the Sentinel Kingdom, right?"

"They're in the top ten. How they rank within the top ten is a matter of intense debate. None of the noble houses who sponsor their universities are willing to give ground." Gavin shrugged. "Rawlings is definitely the best on Cinach VIII,

so I highly recommend you accept their offer. All the other mech design universities aren't worth your time."

Ves briefly frowned at Gavin's dismissive words towards the other universities. He personally attended one of the 'lesser universities', and he had nothing to complain about.

Sure, if he had a choice, he would have rather attended a more prestigious institution such as the Ansel University of Mech Design, but his alma mater was not that bad.

Still, in terms of reputation and credibility, Rawlings beat out all the other local institutions. If Ves wanted to maximize his benefits, then he really had no other alternative.

Ves sighed. "Okay then, Benny. Reach out to Rawlings and tell them that I'm willing to give a guest lecture. Please ask if I can give my guest lecture on short notice, preferably within the week. I don't want to linger in the Cinach System any longer."

"Great! I'll get on it right away! You made the right choice, boss!"

As the enthused Gavin went on to hammer out the arrangements, Nita suddenly arrived in front of him with a deeply concerned expression.

"Sir, I've just received some alarming news! We need to speak in private!"

Ves dropped all joviality and led her to the hotel bathroom. Once he activated his jammer, she began to reveal what she learned.

"It's about the mech you recently built. When you finished it, we packed it into a secure container and shifted it to an empty warehouse to await further transport. When the smugglers arrived at the warehouse to bring the container off-planet, they reported that they haven't found any cargo containers inside!"

"What?!" Ves became alarmed. "It's missing?!"

"Yes! The smugglers weren't able to fulfill the commission because there is nothing for them to sneak past customs!"

"Did they lie to us?!"

Nitaa shook her head. "No, that's not the case. I've arranged some monitoring and nothing suggests that the smugglers have lied to us. They genuinely arrived this morning without encountering any cargo containers!"

"Then how can the container that stores my Devil Tiger be missing?!"

"The smugglers haven't found any containers, but they did find something strange in its place. I.. I think we should visit the warehouse in person."

"Then let's go right away! We need to get to the bottom of this! The Devil Tiger is my first masterwork! No one steals it from under my nose and gets away with it! No one!"

Ves stewed in fury and rage as he brought his entire entourage aboard a shuttle. While he did command them to take an obfuscating route in order to cover some of their tracks, he was too impatient to dance around for half a day.

Soon enough, they arrived at the dilapidated-looking warehouse. The warehouse sat squarely in the middle of a manufacturing district that had fallen on hard times. Almost no one frequented the place other than the gangs that held on to the ruins that remained and tried to eke out the last bit of money they could earn from the worthless facilities.

As Ves entered the warehouse, he encountered a completely empty, dusty space. He could spot a lot of disturbances in the dust from the recent movements.

As Nitaa went on to check some of the monitoring devices installed in the warehouse, Ves walked up all the way to the middle of the massive hall.

Lucky perched up his shoulder as usual and gazed in every direction as if trying to find some clues of what had happened.

A small toy figurine of a mech had been left in the space occupied by the cargo container. The large, rectangle-sized disturbance in the dust noted the complete absence of what should have rested here!

When Ves approached the mech figurine, he began to sense something strange in the surrounding air. It made him feel as if it was a really bad idea to bring his hand closer to the toy.

He frowned. "This is not a normal toy."

Despite the unusual sensation, his intuition didn't warn him of anything dangerous. He even whipped out his Vulcaneye and scanned the toy and found nothing explosive or toxic.

"Strange."

Due to his impatience for answers, he decided to press ahead and pick up the toy.

The instant he touched the figurine, a strange impulse suddenly shot out from the figurine and shot at his mind, passing straight through the defenses of his mind!

His perception momentarily changed! He no longer saw anything, but could still feel his body! In addition, a very familiar voice started whispering in his ears.

"I snooped around before I left this star system. Imagine my surprise when I discover this remarkable mech of yours! Although it is rather more feral than I like, I'm sure your father would love it! Please don't mind if I bring it back to him so he can suppress his rivals with this fine machine. Your present is appreciated!"

The strange experience quickly ended, leaving him with nothing but a cheap mech figurine like the ones he played with in the past.

A tense pause ensued as Ves took in his mother's message, because there was no doubt who took his Devil Tiger!

"MOTHER!" He burst out in rage!

He violently threw the mech figurine against the ground, the force of its fall breaking its cheap composite components apart from each other!

He wanted to scream and rage! This was outrageous! How did she know about his Devil Tiger?! What possessed her to decide it would be a lovely mech for his father to pilot?!

Didn't she realize what an immense risk the mech posed to its mech pilot?!

Ves designed the Devil Tiger as an outlet for his repressed desire to experiment! He planned to treat the scumbag pirates of the Nyxian pirates as his test subjects for his dangerous mech!

He never intended for his Devil Tiger to be piloted by someone he cared about! His father would be putting himself in immense danger if he actually went through and piloted his smart metal tiger mech!

Nothing about the Devil Tiger deliberately warned its mech pilots of the risks they incurred if they piloted his mech! Ves didn't wish to scare away any potential mech pilots after all, so the Devil Tiger did not openly broadcast its risk factors!

Once he calmed down a bit, he realized the worst might not necessarily happen. As far as he knew, his father only piloted humanoid mechs. It shouldn't be easy for someone to adjust to a bestial mech.

"If he's smart, he'll assign a subordinate who specializes in piloting bestial mechs to pilot the Devil Tiger."

Would that truly happen? Ves hoped so. If anything dangerous happened, then his father would just lose a single subordinate.

Yet... his mother's words left open the possibility that his father might pilot the Devil Tiger in person! Due to the lack of disclosure on his part, they would never know what kind of a disaster they invited!

Even if his mother sounded as if she might be able to keep Zeigra's spirituality under control, that did not detract from the Devil Tiger's other dangers!

The hostile design spirit represented only one facet of the Devil Tiger's double-edged nature. What Ves worried about more was the illicit neural interface model he incorporated in the cockpit of his masterwork mech!

The words of Old Man Terrence came to his mind. The specialist in neural interfaces spoke quite vigorously about the dangers of neural interfaces with looser restrictions.

The greater immersion and feedback they provided may strengthen the mech pilot's performance, but also exposed them to potentially greater brain damage when a battle went awry!

This was a problem inherent in the hardware of his Devil Tiger! No matter what kind of spiritual sorceress his mother turned out to be, there was no way she possessed any idea what kind of threat its neural interface posed!

Ves couldn't rely on any of the mech technicians or mech designers under his father's employ either. In order to prevent others from rummaging through his neural interface and finding out the truth, he implemented a lot of measures to camouflage its true nature!

Unless a Journeyman or higher manually inspected the neural interface in person, no one would know the ugly truth!

Neither his mother or father would be able to realize that the Devil Tiger's strength came with an even greater price!

Ves wanted to warn his parents, but his secretive mother hadn't left him with any means to contact her! He had no way of disclosing the full extent of the risks of piloting his Devil Tiger!

"AAAAARRRGGGGHH!"

Chapter 1448 Questionable Wisdom

During the interplanetary transit ride to Cinach VIII, Ves constantly glowered. Not even Lucky's playful antics could lift him from his tempestuous mood.

The hostile air around him did not do him any favors. Along with the pressure exerted by his Pride of Dusk, hardly anyone could stand to be in his presence!

Fortunately, they booked a private suite aboard a larger passenger transport, so Ves had the entire compartment to himself and his followers.

Nitaa and Gavin both knew that Ves lost one of his precious mechs again. While they were a bit confused upon who actually took the Devil Tiger, there was no doubt that Ves took its absence poorly!

"Boss.. if you really care about that mech so much, why not stay behind in Cinach XII? As long as he can find out who's responsible for the theft, we can still get it back!"

Ves shook his head. "We won't be able to find it. I know who took it and I know I won't get it back. All of the investigation we did in the late morning didn't result in any useful findings, and I don't think we'll be able to find anything considering how careful the thief is in covering her tracks."

He didn't even know how his mother managed to make the huge container disappear. Did she bring lackeys with her to the Cinach System who took care of the transport of the mech container, or did she whisk it away in an alternate dimension with her spiritual sorcery?

Whatever the case, his mother's extreme measures to keep her presence hidden meant that Ves had no chance in hell in tracking her down!

His mother had no idea what she was dealing with when she made off with the Devil Tiger! Ves really regretted adding no warning about at least some of the threat his mech posed to the health of its mech pilots!

He really hoped his father didn't pilot the Devil Tiger personally! In fact, he shouldn't since he didn't specialize in piloting bestial mechs!

This realization made him feel a little bit better. His mother may want to put the Devil Tiger to use, but his father should know better!

"Dad used to serve in the Mech Corps." Ves softly muttered. "He should know what is proper and what is not. Piloting a mech type that you don't have any proficiency in is a big taboo in the service."

What would his father want to do with a landbound tiger mech anyway? Most battles in the Nyxian Gap took place in space. His father originally specialized in piloting landbound melee mechs, though like any Larkinson he diverted enough training to raise his spaceborn combat proficiency to at least a basic level of competency.

If his dad had any sense, he would have probably focused on raising his spaceborn mech piloting skills even further. Otherwise, how could he ever keep himself space in the predominantly spaceborn fighting environment of the Nyxian Gap?

Splitting up his precious training time by learning how to pilot a tiger mech from scratch made absolutely no sense!

His father should possess enough logic to realize what a monumental bad idea it was for him to learn how to pilot a bestial mech well past his mech academy days!

At his age, learning how to pilot a completely new mech type was a waste of his father's time.

Ves silently sent a prayer hoping that his father hadn't forgotten all of his Larkinson and Mech Corps training while he slumped it out in the Nyxian Gap.

As Ves cast his eyes downwards, they swept across the fabric of his overcoat.

His eyes suddenly shone!

Perhaps he still had a way of contacting his parents! Two ways, even!

His Pride of Dusk's overcoat still contained a separated fragment of Zeigra's spirituality. The latter in turn inhabited both the Devil Tiger's design and its physical masterwork copy!

He began to concentrate his mind and cast it towards his design. He immediately sensed the main body of Zeigra's spirituality. As Ves went on to brush his Spirituality against it, he immediately encountered a hostile reaction!

"Ouch!\

Zeigra blindly lashed out at Ves as soon as the Crown Cat recognized one of the people responsible for killing his organic body!

"Stupid cat! Behave!\

"Meow?!\

Lucky raised his head from Ves' lap in alarm. As Ves attempted to make contact with Zeigra's Spirituality several times, the intelligent but very feral huge cat spirit only grew more vicious and unwilling!

There was no way Ves could get through to Zeigra!

Ves tried to do the same towards Zeigra's spiritual fragment locked inside his overcoat, but its connection to the Crown Cat's main spirituality meant that he encountered the exact same response!

"You're weaker, though!"

The critical difference between the fragment and the whole spiritual entity was their strength. Ves easily managed to push his Spirituality past the defenses of the fragment, but he had little to go on from there.

Because the fragment only possessed a loose connection to its main spirituality, Ves had no way of ascertaining the state of the Devil Tiger mech through its design spirit!

This method turned out to be a bust as well!

Without turning Zeigra friendly, Ves saw no way in convincing the stubborn spiritual entity into passing on a message to the Devil Tiger mech!

However, this was not his only recourse now that he thought about it. He also left open a means for him to retrieve logs from the Devil Tiger and upload some new instructions to the mech through the galactic net.

Ves could still warn his parents of the incredible danger surrounding the Devil Tiger's use! For example, he could upload a change in programming that would plainly project a giant message in the cockpit that explicitly detailed all of the risk factors of the mech in question!

He could even go a step further! The programming of the Devil Tiger was like an incredibly complicated virtual machine with many interlocking components. As long as Ves uploaded a software update that purposely sabotaged some key coding in its programming, his mech would no longer be able to fight!

In fact, Ves could even program the pure ASMAS to destroy the entire Devil Tiger from within! In that way, he could eliminate the chance his father would endanger himself by piloting the smart metal tiger mech!

As Ves began to figure out the programming required to turn the Devil Tiger into an inert pile of broken materials and nanomachines, he realized one crucial precondition.

The Devil Tiger had to gain access to the galactic net in order to upload its status and download his software updates!

All of the wonderful programming that Ves planned to prepare might remain unused and forgotten in an obscure corner of the galactic net so long as his father never connected to it!

"Do the pirates of the Nyxian Gap connect to the galactic net?" Ves asked all of a sudden.

"No idea." Gavin shrugged.

"As far as I know, they rarely do so." Nitaa spoke. "The Nyxian Gap is well-known for its prevalent spatial anomalies. I don't understand the science of it all, but I've heard that most quantum entanglement nodes no longer work right when they are brought to this turbulent region of space."

"You're right." Ves palmed his face in despair. "The Nyxian Gap might as well be a separate realm from the main plane of reality!"

As someone versed in the sciences, Ves understood more about the effect the anomalies had on the Nyxian Gap.

Nitaa was correct that most of the space in the Nyxian Gap was too turbulent to connect to the galactic net.

There were exceptions, though. In some rare regions of space, the spatial fluctuations were less severe, allowing for limited connections to the galactic net.

However, even if his father entered such a space, would he ever patch into the galactic net, knowing that he was under constant pursuit?

If his father and mother truly insisted on hiding themselves, they would never allow an insecure connection to the galactic net to give themselves away!

Ves assumed that most pirates and dark mercenaries were too sloppy to care too much about virtual security, yet he knew his parents would never be that stupid!

"Damn it! I really hope they aren't as paranoid as I think they are! Who can live without the galactic net these days?"

He continued to groan into his palms for a while until he recovered.

Regardless of whether his worst fears might come true, he still maintained hope that his father would see sense or that he would check in onto the galactic net once a while!

"I have nothing but hope to go on!"

Ves immediately summoned a small interface from his comm and rapidly programmed some preliminary coding. He laid out an outline of what he wanted to implement in the software update for his Devil Tiger and planned to flesh them out over the course of the next few days as he waited for his various appointments to arrive.

He also realized that Zeigra presented another avenue for him to ascertain the state of the Devil Tiger. As long as Zeigra did not exhibit any changes, the Devil Tiger was probably fine.

Ves could even use the huge cat spirit as a middleman to communicate a message to his parents.

Unfortunately, trying to make friends with Zeigra was a nearly impossible challenge! Who would ever want to forgive their killer?

For a short moment, Ves contemplated breaking Zeigra apart or removing him from his position as the Devil Tiger's design spirit.

Ves could not predict what would happen if he acted rashly.

He had a feeling that he would only be breaking the bond between the intangible design and its only physical copy.

In fact, his intuition hinted to him that Zeigra's spirituality might even cut itself off from the design and reside solely in the masterwork mech in order to escape Ves' reach!

Zeigra might even cut off all ties to its spiritual fragment that Ves held hostage in his overcoat!

"I should reduce his hostility towards me." Ves grimaced as he looked down on his coat. Turning some of Zeigra's remains into an outfit and a mounted display piece didn't sound like a good idea anymore. "I can only work at it slowly."

Time healed all wounds. As long as enough time had passed for Zeigra to forget his old life and his traumatic death, Ves might have a chance to earn its friendship.

"Well, let's see what I can do for now."

The passenger transport eventually brought them to the surface of Cinach XII. Once there, they checked in an upscale hotel where Ves holed up in his room. He held a small programming marathon session where he programmed a thorough, multi-layered software update that if applied to the Devil Tiger would certainly render it inert or warn its mech pilots of its dangers!

Ves encrypted the coding and discreetly uploaded it onto a very specific address in the galactic net.

"This is all I can do for now!" He sighed.

As much as Ves wanted to agonize and beat himself up for unwittingly handing over an extremely dangerous mech to his father, he couldn't ignore his other responsibilities.

Ves emerged outside of his hotel room like a recluse who hadn't seen daylight in years.

"Are you back to normal, boss?" Gavin cautiously asked.

"Yeah." Ves rubbed his tired face. "What's on the agenda?"

"Nitaa managed to arrange the time and date of your pickup for your more.. delicate appointment. It's in two days. As for the guest lecture at Rawlings, you're still expected tomorrow. Are you well enough to speak in front of a class? I heard that news of your guest lecture has led to a large explosion of interest among the student body. Rawlings already notified me that they decided to shift the guest lecture to a larger auditorium in order to accommodate all of the students who want to listen to your tales!"

Ves looked surprised. "Am I really that popular?"

"Why not?" Gavin smirked. "You're a prodigy and a star to the students! Aside from that, your record is filled with adventure! All of those adolescents at Rawlings are in love with all of the excitement you've lived through! I told you, Ves. You're a role model to the students!"

Ves seriously questioned the wisdom of treating him as a role model in his profession.

Chapter 1449 Independent Mech Designer

Many states had a tendency to concentrate some of their universities on a single planet. The theory was that the academic environment and easy collaborations fostered at these locations led to greater innovation.

Having visited the fantastic Leemar System, Ves could see why this might be true. However, he also thought that isolating students on a planet that

revolved entirely around their needs might not be the best way to prepare themselves for the challenges they faced in the future.

Spending just a brief amount of time in the idyllic, paradise planet of Cinach VIII firmly gave him the impression of an elaborate greenhouse. The comfort of the students mattered just as much as how much knowledge they absorbed during their time of learning.

Frankly, Ves favored the harsh but highly realistic learning method of the Leemar University of Technology. Useless mech design students who weren't able to keep up never made it to their second year of their courses.

Still, that was an unfair comparison to make. While Rawlings ranked in the top ten universities for mech design in the Sentinel Kingdom, Leemar was considered as one of the top universities in the entire Komodo Star Sector!

Not only that, but Leemar also generously opened its doors a bit to foreign students from third-rate states. The inflow of smart, talented and ambitious students beggared the mind. If the LIT did not implement a cutthroat regime to filter out the ones who fell short of their exacting standards, it would have buckled under the sheer crush of numbers!

That said, Rawlings still attracted an immense amount of applicants from all over the Sentinel Kingdom. Because most of its students came from domestic schools, Rawlings possessed much greater access to the academic records of their applicants. This allowed the university to select those they desired and those who were highly likely to keep up with the course loads.

"The average excellence of our students is the main reason why our graduation rates are high." Professor Rachel Nxi calmly explained as he guided Ves across the green and verdant campus of Rawlings. "Rawlings has produced some of the most brilliant mech designers in the Sentinel Kingdom, and that has continued to attract ambitious students. By picking the brightest

among them, our institution is able to maintain a virtuous circle where our graduates continue to set an example."

Ves listened respectfully while he walked side by side with the Senior Mech Designer. Gavin was off to take care of some business while Nitaa respectfully followed him from behind with Lucky clinging to her shoulder like a wet towel.

While Ves wore his full Pride of Dusk regalia to his visit to Rawlings, this was no time for posturing. He raised the spiritual barrier blocking the aura of his overcoat to such a degree that the Professor Nxi only sensed a subconscious pressure, which she easily ignored due to her own mental fortitude.

Right now, it was enough to distinguish his appearance from that of an average student. While his face had matured a bit, he was still young enough that he could easily be mistaken as a student! How could he possibly earn the respect of the class he was about to lecture if he dressed no different from a bro?

"Sounds like Rawlings has it pretty good." Ves answered with some admiration. Rawlings had it really good once they set up this so-called virtuous cycle! "I take that there are still some points where your school wishes to improve, right?"

The middle-aged woman smiled. "There is always room for improvement. Everyone knows Rawlings is among the top ten universities for mech design. However, why are we not among the top five or the top three?"

"Because the rankings place you in the sixth to tenth rank?"

"As painful as it is for us to admit, that is indeed the case. Ranking in the top ten is an accomplishment, but it is nothing to celebrate about in my eyes." Professor Nxi appeared downcast.

"That is still a great accomplishment. Rawlings stands head and shoulders above hundreds of other institutions in the Sentinel Kingdom. Your university has much to be proud of. Even Ansel, my home state's best mech design university, seems pale compared to this fine school!"

Professor Nxi ruefully chuckled. "Come now, Mr. Larkinson. Mech designers such as us base our decisions around facts and logic. If you ignore all of the hype, then our situation is much less impressive than it seems. The competition in the Sentinel Kingdom is immense. Despite our advantages, breaking into the top five is difficult for us because we are weighed down by one disappointing criteria. You've already seen a glimpse of what our school offers to our students. Can you guess the answer?"

As the Dean of the Mech Mechanics Department, she possessed a vested interest in the standing of Rawlings. For her to be unsatisfied with a top ten ranking meant she took it very personally.

After a brief moment of thought, Ves responded with his best guess. "While the conditions in Rawlings look great, I don't think the students who graduate are sufficiently prepared to pursue their dream careers."

"That's a good guess. It's very close to the truth." The professor looked impressed. "To be more precise, most of our graduates end up pursuing career prospects. The military, noble houses, Peacekeepers, mech companies and many others rate our Rawlings mech designers highly, because they do well when they are working in an existing structure."

That was a peculiar way of describing the success of Rawlings graduates. Ves immediately recognized the category that had been left out by Professor Nxi's deliberate wording.

"What about the Rawlings graduates who decide to strike it on their own and start their own businesses? Are they doing just as well?"

The professor replied with a blunt answer. \"No. Frankly, they are not. Despite the financial backing they possess as nobles or the raw ability they possess as prodigies, the mech market cannot accommodate all of them. The competition here is also intense, and only the best startups have a chance of surviving more than five years.\"

The universities that ranked higher in the Sentinel Kingdom evidently did better in this regard. A higher proportion of their graduates managed to achieve success when starting their own business.

This was a very important metric because mech designers who founded and led their own mech companies enjoyed the highest regard in the mech industry!

Every mech designer dreamt of being in charge of their own mech design projects! Those who worked for the military or another mech company simply didn't have the power to set the parameters of their next mech designs!

For this reason, those who worked for themselves also progressed the fastest!

That said, there was nothing wrong with being a dependent mech designer who worked for others.

Some simply didn't have the connections, charisma or ability to attract start-up capital. Most commoners of the Sentinel Kingdom suffered from this problem.

Others might possess a high affinity for mechs but a poor affinity for business. Putting such types in charge was just a disaster in the making. Even noble scions weren't exempt from this problem.

Noble houses that threw in good money after bad were just wasting their money trying to lift off the poor business prospects of these financially-inept mech designers!

Ves found something strange, though. "Since you seem to recognize this problem, professor, why haven't you done something about it? Surely you must have some ideas in mind to improve the business prospects of your graduates."

"Rawlings University is very large. Even though I am a dean of one of its faculties, my right to speak is not as great as you think it is. Every institution on Cinach VIII, including Rawlings, answers solely to House Gin Tefa. Our esteemed noble masters have their own ideas on how all of the universities on their soil should be run, and have maintained the same policies for centuries, with good results."

It sounded as if House Gin Tefa applied a one-size-fits-all solution to every university. No matter if they educated exobiologists, businessmen, psychologists or starship engineers, it was a lot easier to run their schools if they all followed similar templates!

Professor Nxi essentially admitted that her hands were tied on this matter.

"I see. Surely you must be able to do something within your power, right?"

"That's where guest lecturers like you come on." She smiled at him with renewed interest. "I may not be able to steer our curriculum in a different direction, but what I can do is invite independent mech designers to expose my students to those who have struggled through all of the challenges and managed to find their footing in the private mech market. Reading about people like you in a textbook is one thing, but listening to your lessons and words of wisdom in person is another thing!"

Ves momentarily blinked. Now that he thought about it, that was a great idea. While a couple of guest lectures was unlikely to exert a major influence in the future direction of the students, the added exposure to the problems and

practicalities of starting a mech company might raise the chances of success by a few percentage points.

This difference might sound miniscule, but raising just ten or so successful independent mech designers a year was enough to enhance the standing of their school!

"I understand, professor. You want me to focus on the business side of mech design, is that right?"

"Correct. I want those who aim to become an entrepreneur and those who are thinking of working for entrepreneurs to gain a realistic impression of the highly competitive mech market. No matter how much our business courses emphasize the difficulty of achieving success in the private sector, the heads of our students are too stuffed with pride to take them to heart."

"I know the type." Ves snorted. He instantly thought back of the spoiled and pampered Ansel brats he once babysitted for Flashlight. "While they might claim they have learned the lessons, secretly they think they are too exceptional to be counted among the failures, right? Even if only five percent of graduates following the independent route achieve success, none of them will ever admit that it's more likely that they will suffer the fate of the other ninety-five percent!"

To Ves, it sounded as idiotic as a hundred lottery ticket holders each believing that they were destined to win the jackpot!

"Ambition is to be cherished, and failure is one of the greatest lessons our graduates can learn. That said, I would really like it if you focus your lecture on raising the business acumen of my students. Will you need more time to prepare your presentation?"

"No." Ves shook his head. "It's just two hours, right? I can fill an entire day if you want."

"Our students have other classes to attend." The professor smiled. "I appreciate your enthusiasm. Your confidence is encouraging. I'm sure you will be an enlightening figure to our classes and set a great example for our future mech designers."

Compared to addressing the entire Ylvaine Protectorate during a farcical trial that decided the fate of his life, conducting a presentation in front of a class of mech design students was a walk in the park! Ves did not exhibit any trepidation at all!

"Is there anything else you'd like me to address, professor?"

"In fact, there is. I'm sure you know all about our contentious relationship with the Nyxian Gap. It's sad of me to acknowledge this, but there are a number of bad apples among our graduates who failed to achieve the success they dreamt about. Laden with debt and abandoned by their backers, most of them rein in their ambition and become dependent mech designers. However..."

"Some can't accept that they've lost. They believe they are winners. They're willing to do everything to prove that they are special."

"It sounds like you already have a good idea of what I'm referring to, Mr. Larkinson."

Ves smirked. "I know the type. There are probably several Rawlings mech designers who run off to the Nyxian Gap in order to obtain a second chance among the pirates, right?"

"They are a stain upon the reputation of the Rawlings University! Each year, at least a handful of our mech designers go pirate! While we have done our best to instill our students with the proper values, some of them are too deaf to realize that the road to evil is a dead end!"

"So.. you want me to discourage the students from thinking about working for pirates?"

"Yes! As an orthodox mech designer who achieved great success, you must set a moral example! Teach them that the only correct path is the righteous path!"

Ves briefly hesitated a bit. A moral example? Him?

Nonetheless, he did not wish to disappoint the professor's expectation.

"Have no fear, professor. Morality is one of my strong points! I'll make sure they follow the right path!"

Chapter 1450 Guest Lecture

Despite the short notice of his guest lecture, a lot of students wanted to attend it. Originally, Professor Nxi only wanted Ves to lecture a single class of senior students.

Yet as soon as word broke out that a prodigal Journeyman with a colorful track record was about to speak in front of a class, many more students wanted to attend!

The demand became so high that Professor Nxi gained the leverage to shift the lecture towards one of their larger speaking venues.

At one of the larger auditoriums of Rawlings, a crowd numbering almost ten-thousand mech design students eagerly took their place on one of the many comfortable padded red seats.

While Ves knew that Rawlings educated even more students, he could scarcely fathom the consequences of releasing so many new mech designers into Sentinel's already bountiful mech industry!

Rawlings was not the only university who pumped out mech designers! Other institutions in the top ten each educated enormous numbers of mech designers as well, and many lesser schools also released a tsunami of badly-prepared mech designers into the wild every year!

No matter how many employment opportunities the Sentinel Kingdom and the Komodo Star Sector offered to freshly-graduated mech designers, there was no way it could accommodate that many!

Ves already knew that the vast majority of mech designers would face disappointment and failure and be forced to transition into lesser technical jobs.

Though Ves lamented the waste, he knew why the MTA pushed for this absurd policy from the top.

They wanted to cast a wide net in order to provide opportunities to as many people with psionic potential as possible!

The MTA also wished to foster a competitive environment to stimulate every ambitious mech designer. Some of those who survived and thrived in such difficult market environments often went on to become the next generation of Seniors and Masters.

Though Ves understood the logic of this policy, witnessing the sheer amount of students who all wanted to join his profession hit home the human cost of educating so many mech designers.

"Too many of them are set up for failure." He whispered.

Right now, Ves stood in an enclosure in the rear area of the auditorium.

No props were being prepared. Though Professor Nxi offered him the opportunity to call up some mechs to use as props, he declined the offer. If he couldn't show off one of his own mechs, he would rather resort to projections than someone else's products.

"It's too bad the Sentinel Kingdom is too far from the Bright Republic." He sighed.

It would take weeks or months to import one of his existing mechs to Cinach VIII. That took way too much time, and Ves didn't see the need to wait for such a long time just because he wanted to impress his audience.

He was confident enough that he could do so without the use of this aid.

"I used to be one of those students, you know." Ves told his bodyguard, gesturing towards the growing audience. "Seeing them brings back memories. I never left the Bright Republic. My monthly allowance was but a miniscule fraction of the money I had at my disposal."

Nitaa directed a skeptical glance at him. "Surely you must have thought yourself greater than your classmates, right?"

He knew what she was talking about. He decided to be honest and shook his head.

"I'm not as exceptional as you think I am. Back then, I was just an average kid who naively thought that my mediocre academic record gave me a shot at success. I was wrong. Very, very wrong."

"Then.. how come you are.. as great as you are today?"

"I have my parents to thank for that. They are greater than you can ever realize. I'm just the one who reaped the benefits of their sacrifice and hard work."

He let Nitaa process his words by herself as Professor Nxi walked over to him. She eyed his Pride of Dusk once again. The distinct badge of the Galactic Hunting Club looked very distinctive on the breast of his overcoat.

"Commanding the attention of so many students isn't easy, but I'm sure your current appearance will go a long way in making the more conceited fellows honest."

Ves decided to make a dignified impression. He left his decorative cat ears in his pockets. He also decided to leave Lucky with Nitaa.

"Is there anything you'd like me to take note of, professor?"

"This will mostly be your show. While a number of professors like myself will be sitting in the front seats, it is up to you to engage the students. Also, I'd like to remind you that your guest lecture will also be recorded and broadcasted through our channels in the Sentinel Kingdom and beyond."

"I am aware. That's all in the contract we've signed."

Both sides sought to benefit from each other.

Ves wanted to borrow Rawlings University's credibility.

In turn, Rawlings University to borrow Ves' prestige and halo of success.

For this reason, Ves handed over most of the rights to his guest lecture for Rawlings to use as they wished. They secured the right to slap their logo over the footage and market their institution to the Sentinel Kingdom by using snippets of his own lecture as promotional material.

Ten more minutes passed by until the entrances to the auditorium finally closed. Soon, Ves received the signal to start the lecture.

"Good luck, Mr. Larkinson. Our staff will support you as best as we can." The professor said before she stepped towards the front row of seats.

The guest lecture began in earnest when the vast majority of the large and empty podium began to light up as a massive projection came online.

No sound originated from the footage that Ves selected, but the crowd of mech design students instantly fell silent.

When the professor gave Ves the option to choose the footage he wanted to start with, he declined to show off his mech designs or his participation in the recent Crown Hunt.

Ves wanted to set a certain tone for his lecture. Puffing himself up had its time and place, but the last thing he wanted to do was to come across as a braggart whose mouth was bigger than his accomplishments.

He already enjoyed a nasty reputation due to his hateful Devil Tongue moniker!

Therefore, the soundless footage did not depict the glorious Aurora Titan. It did not depict the radiant Transcendent Messenger either. In fact, neither Ves nor any of his products could be found in any of the clips that Ves selected in the montage.

Instead, Ves opted to project snapshots of some of the bloodiest battles of the Bright-Vesia Wars.

There was nothing glorious about the battles. The worn-out Brighter mechs, whether splattered by mud or leaking air in space, fought desperately against their Vesian adversaries!

In some cases, the mechs of the Mech Corps barely prevailed, but at the cost of most of their mechs and mech pilots. In other cases, the Mech Legion brutally crushed the opposition, paving the way for further bloody incursions!

Amidst all of this eerily silent collage of battle footage, Ves moved out onto the podium and gradually stepped to the middle.

While Ves had been given the option to speak behind a lectern, he needed no notes to speak from his heart. He also wanted his Pride of Dusk to be visible to everyone in the audience!

The distracting footage caused most of the students to become enraptured by the desperate struggles of the forces of the Mech Corps. Hardly anyone took notice of Ves at the start.

However, as Ves neared the center, he began to weaken the spiritual barrier holding the aura of his Pride of Dusk in check.

The invisible aura around him began to strengthen. Though those who sat closest to the front noticed the sensation first, soon enough the aura grew strong enough to encompass the entire auditorium!

With the help of his overcoat, Ves silently managed to command the attention of tens of thousands of mech design students! Even the dozens of professors who decided to attend his guest lecture out of curiosity or boredom no longer dismissed him as a flash-in-the-pan sensation!

His boots echoed against the surface of the podium with one last crack as he reached the very center. He cast his gaze at the entire audience, sweeping from left to right. His heavy presence, enhanced by Zeigra's unrelenting range and pride, forced everyone to acknowledge his existence.

If any of the students sat too far away to make out his face, then the side projections of a close-up of his entire body made sure that even the one sitting in the very back viewed him clearly!

No one chatted. No one shared jokes with each other. No one played games on their comms.

At this moment, Ves captured the complete attention of each and every person present.

Ves gestured his arm towards the battle footage continuing running in the background.

"I am not a Sentinel. I am a Brighter. This is the reality that I have grown up in. The Bright-Vesia Wars that has marked my home state has influenced our mech culture as strongly as the Nyxian Gap has influenced yours."

His voice conveyed a lot of weight. Amplified by the auditorium's speakers, his deceptively-calm voice pressured the formerly-jovial mech design students even further.

"War has dominated every facet of the Bright Republic. Mech designers like me are not exempt from contributing to the war effort. Though there is plenty of glory and honor to be earned in war, let me tell you, if you're stationed at the frontlines, most of the time you're more preoccupied with surviving the next battle than dreaming about the next medal you can pin on your chest!"

Ves believed he managed to convey the severity of the wars that had plagued the Bright Republic to the students.

"There is a reason why I showed you a taste of what our wars are like. It is to remind you of the role we serve. In the future, some of you will go on to help the brave Sentinel mech pilots survive their coming battles. Whether your mechs will be put to use against the Nyxian pirates or some hostile state, know that the responsibility you bear is greater than you think. The fate of not only your customers, but the innocents who they protect all depend on your work!"

His words caused the people present to feel a lot more solemn about their profession than before! With how self-centered mech designers tended to be about their careers, it was difficult for them to think through the consequences of their actions!

"Many of you dream of becoming a mech designer of renown. Perhaps you heard about me and decided to become like me. However, ask yourselves, is it easy to follow in my footsteps?"

Silence ensued. No one dared to speak up at this tense and solemn moment.

"Come now, don't be shy." He smiled in a wicked fashion. "Let me make it easier and pose a simple request. Please raise your hands if you believe you will become a Master Mech Designer in your lifetime!"

For a moment, only a handful dared to raise their hands. The professors hesitated least of all. They either decisively raised their hands or kept them lowered in an honest assessment of their capabilities.

As for the students, Ves still sensed a lot of hesitation among the crowd.

"Have I visited the wrong university? Am I speaking in front of Rawlings students or not?! Come now! Where is your ambition! Raise your hands if you believe in yourself! Don't be shy!"

Under his encouragement, around thirty percent of the students eventually raised their hands.

"What an impressive amount of ambition!" Ves dramatically gasped. "If each and you are able to fulfill your dreams, then the Sentinel Kingdom would probably be home to more Masters than the amount of Masters in the Bright Republic and the Hexadric Hegemony combined!"

That was an absurd statement! Everyone knew the chances of advancing to Masters. The odds of advancing to Masters from those who emerged from third-rate states was microscopically small!

In fact, it was pretty much unheard of in the Komodo Star Sector!

Ves exagerratingly shook his head. "Only about a third of you raised your hand. I'm disappointed."

He abruptly thumped his fist against his palm before pointing his finger at the audience in an accusatory manner. "I'm disappointed, but not at those who raised their hands and thought they have what it takes to become a Master!

Instead, I'm let down by the rest of you who didn't have the guts to set your sights higher!"

The moods of every student and professor suddenly experienced turmoil!
What kind of guest lecture was this?! Didn't Ves know the awful odds that any of them could ever advance to Master one day?!