

Chapter 1501 The Greatest Need

Hearing about the changes taking place in the Bright Republic and Cloudy Curtain really made Ves homesick.

His home state underwent huge changes that transformed almost every fabric of its society! The government didn't spare anything to muster its defenses and prepare for the inevitable sandman onslaught!

Ves wanted to return as soon as possible to lead the LMC through the current crisis!

"I only have one more stop before my fleet turns home." He reminded himself. "I still have some business at the Hertog Dominion. It wouldn't do me any good to skip this destination."

After his treacherous—ahem, patriotic assistant finished his daily briefing and left, Ves fell into thought.

With Nitaa standing on guard and Lucky crawling over his body, Ves tried his best to make sense of the past few days. His recent insights related to his design philosophy, the responses towards the sandman invasion and Gavin's double dealings all bubbled in his mind like a soup.

Though these topics weren't necessarily related to each other, the more Ves reflected on them, the more he began to see a way to connect them together.

Over the past several days, Ves tried his best to gain inspiration in order to form a bold and fitting vision for his current design project. Without a unifying idea to guide his efforts, how could he ever design a spaceborn rifleman mech that stood out from the crowd?

As Ves activated his terminal and idly started browsing current news articles from the Bright Republic, the seed that had been planted in his thoughts started to bloom.

What did the border states lack the most? Why did they collapse months before they were expected to fall?

"Too many citizens have given up! Even the mech pilots and military officers have lost hope!"

Ves didn't blame them. The sandman invasion had surprised them all. Hardly any border state received enough time to shore up their defenses before the sandmen fleets flooded out of the deep frontier and crashed into civilized space like a tide!

No sane citizen would stick around and give up their lives in a hopeless cause to stall the sandman invasion for the benefit of others. Rather than sacrifice their lives for the betterment of random people, they would rather save their own hides!

Nonetheless, plenty of courageous mech pilots had stuck to their home states until they could no longer hold their positions. Some even held their posts to the very end!

Plenty of stories of courage and sacrifice from the border states circulated in the galactic net, but they were few and far in between. At this time, most stories centered around the immense amount of refugees hitching rides on any available starship!

These refugees had abandoned their state while feeling abandoned themselves.

It was a sad state of affairs. The societal cohesion at the border states had been too weak to unite their people together when they most needed it.

"Fortunately, the Bright Republic is better off."

The states situated further away from the border not only enjoyed more time until the sandmen reached their territories, but also learned from the mistakes of the border states.

At the very least, the amount of Brighters seeking to flee from the Bright Republic, thereby robbing the state of valuable manpower, was quite modest!

While the government couldn't stop anyone from leaving if they really wanted to, most Brighters strongly believed that they were tough enough to withstand the imminent alien onslaught!

Not just the Bright Republic intended to stand their ground. The Vesians were just as pumped to defend their state and defeat the aliens!

When Ves compared the attitudes between the refugees and the citizens of the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom, he believed he found the key element that made all of the difference!

"It's duty! We serve because it is expected of us! We fight because it is our duty to fight!"

Duty!

While Ves recognized that duty was not infallible in the face of an overwhelming threat, currently the sandman invasion hadn't reached the point where resistance was futile.

As long as everyone did their duty, the defense lines would hold! Every analyst commenting on the current crisis agreed with this conclusion! With a CFA warfleet on their way to annihilate the rear lines of the sandman empire, the states under threat just needed to hold long enough to exhaust the current waves of sandmen invaders!

Ves pinned down the theme he wanted to incorporate into his upcoming mech design!

"It's duty! That was what I was looking for all this time!"

It was as if a light illuminated the darkness that made him feel lost. Now that he found his light, he had found his direction! He knew what his spaceborn rifleman mech needed to center around in order for it to be useful enough to make a difference!

Ves decided to focus on the concept of duty for multiple reasons.

First, he wanted to do his duty by designing a mech that could help the Bright Republic and other states fend off the sandmen. He believed that the mech he was about to envision would be one of the best solutions on the market.

Second, he wanted the mech pilots who defended their states to do their duty as well. Even if they weren't supplied with expensive mechs, the brave men and women on the frontlines deserved as much support as possible.

"Mechs form the most important support to mech pilots! Everything else is merely supplementary! As long as their mechs are strong and dependable, the pilots will perform their duties with confidence!"

By emphasizing the concept of duty in his next mech design, Ves not only hoped to do his part, but also influence the mech pilots into standing their ground under difficult circumstances!

This was the third reason, and perhaps the most compelling one to mech buyers!

"The Bright Republic expects every mech pilot to do their duty. Our defense will only hold if everyone believes in themselves!"

The Mech Corps would undoubtedly play the main role in this coming conflict, but the private outfits were expected to ease the military's burden.

All of the military mech regiments of the Bright Republic could only cover so much territory.

The smaller planets and star systems needed protection as well. That was where mercenary corps and security companies hired by the state played a role. If all of the mercenaries and corporate mech pilots did their duties, then the Bright Republic would have enough soldiers to stall the sandmen and buy more time for the auxiliary regiments to come online!

"In the border states, the local outfits fled first! Hardly any mercenary corps stuck around!"

The flight of so many private outfits not only weakened the defensive lines, but also sparked a lot of panic! Seeing so many mechs and ships depart from the border states prompted many citizens to lose hope and encouraged them to join the great flight!

It was far too late to stop the flood of escaping citizens once it gained momentum!

"It's like a chain reaction. An initial instance of panic will incite others to panic as well!"

It was vitally important to prevent this reaction from setting off by halting it at the very start! This was why the Bright Republic exhorted everyone that they could succeed in defeating the sandmen as long as everyone remained brave!

"The government is pulling out all the stops!" Ves realized from all of the media manipulation he encountered over the course of his investigations.

Ves likened the Bright Republic's measures to Major Verle's morale-oriented leadership style, but at a much larger scale. Both focused on keeping hope alive and encouraged everyone to do their duty whether they fought on the frontlines or helped in the production of valuable supplies.

Many states adopted similar approaches.

For once, the Vesians put down their infighting and genuinely banded together.

The Ylvaine Protectorate rallied every believer by appealing to their faith.

The two neighboring states of the Bright Republic were both able to raise the cohesion of their people. They were already used to answering to authority and they were anything but weak or cowardly.

Ves especially admired the Ylvainans for volunteering for military duty despite not being trained to do so. The Kronons, Poxco and Curin Dynasties each deployed their Transcendent Messengers at various population centers in order to drum up support and inspire the Ylvainans to sacrifice themselves for the betterment of the Ylvainan Faith!

Of course, not every state succeeded in rallying their citizens to stick around and assist in the war effort.

The Reinaldians for example left their state in droves. The profiteering traders who reaped great profits during peacetime all threw everything they could carry into their starships and left for better pastures as soon as it became clear the MTA wouldn't bail them out!

The flight of the so-called pillars of the community inspired many other Reinaldians to pack up their bags and leave! They spent the bulk of their wealth on buying passage on cramped starships, whose captains bilked the cowards as much as possible!

"The Reinald Republic is doomed." Ves concluded.

The so-called 'Frozen Leaf Alliance' that united a bunch of weaker states like the Reinald Republic into a military alliance had successfully deterred larger states from invading their territories.

However, while their military alliance worked against their neighbors, it didn't mean anything to the relentless sandmen! Alliance or not, it made no difference to the aliens!

The thought of waging true war for the first time in centuries scared the Reinaldians witless! With all of the awful news and footage transmitted from the border states, hardly any Reinaldian had the guts to stick up for a state that never really inspired their loyalty anyway!

For now, the Honored Ones demonstrated their commitment to defend the territories of the Reinald Republic, but how long could they hold while their friends and families fled in rapid tempo?

Ves never thought highly of the Honored Ones. Their war readiness had never been tested in an actual conflict. Against a relentless foe that couldn't be bribed, the Honored Ones would be forced to fight actual battles in order to win.

"Impossible!"

Perhaps he was being a bit too unfair to the Honored Ones, but Ves always considered the Honored Ones to be weak and inept due to their long years of peace.

The unofficial pirate gangs that the Reinald Republic used to put pressure on the Vesia Kingdom and other non-allied states couldn't be relied upon either! Let alone expect them to do their duty, they were never assigned a duty in the first place!

Even if all of their men consisted of Reinaldians, the pirates were too selfish and cowardly to ever put their lives on the line for an abstract ideal!

The inconsistent outcomes among many different states all depended on how much their people were willing to do their duty. Even if the mech pilots were willing to fight, the citizens may have already lost heart!

"This is a problem that is critical to the survival of the states under threat! It's also a problem where my specialty is exceptionally suitable to address!"

Ves knew his strengths. The market started to become familiar with them as well through his products.

What better than to take full advantage of his specialty and design a mech that was made to inspire everyone to do their duty?

"Whatever accusations of brainwashing I'll receive, such a mech would doubtlessly be useful in the hands of my customers!"

He could already imagine the market going wild for a product that not only shored up the conviction of mech pilots, but also influenced the people around them to do their duty!

It was as if he was designing a mass-produced version of the Transcendent Messenger!

"My next mech will be both a war machine and a morale-boosting monument! As long as I sell enough mechs, I can single-handedly influence the outcome of this crisis!"

Chapter 1502 Expedient Duty

This was going to be his most ambitious and far-reaching mech design project to date!

Duty was the key ingredient he had been looking for to distinguish his ballistic rifleman mech. No matter how many advantages competing designs offered, hardly any of them could serve the need that his product was meant to address.

"Only my mech can inspire people to do their duty!"

If successful, the value of his products would immediately become evident. Ves believed that many actors would recognize their value and deploy them en masse in order to shore up morale and inspire everyone to do their duty.

When Ves pitched his idea to Gavin later in the day, his assistant looked gobsmacked but also impressed.

"This... this is a brilliant idea!" He finally replied. "This is genius! I've never thought about applying the LMC's distinctive advantages in this direction!"

Ves confidently grinned as he idly played with Lucky. "I'm glad you recognize the merit of my idea. This is a new and untested idea, though. Do you have any remarks about applying this idea to my latest design project?"

"It would be great if some military mech regiments adopted your mech."

"That's not possible, Benny. I have to make too many adaptations and I'll have to answer to a bunch of Seniors in order to make my mech suitable for military use." Ves immediately shook his head.

He worked extensively with military mechs. He was well aware that his own mech designs fell short in too many areas to fall into the consideration of the Mech Corps and other military mech forces.

Gavin scratched his head. "Well, I'm sure your mech will catch on in the private market, but.. it's kind of strange to sell a mech that is oriented around duty to mercenary corps and security companies. They're not exactly known for standing their ground and valuing their duty over their lives."

"In ordinary circumstances, this mismatch is a serious problem. These aren't ordinary times, though. A vast alien invasion is threatening to overwhelm us all and the private outfits aligned to the states aren't entirely willing to abandon their homes. At the very least, many of the outfits in the Bright Republic are made up of veterans who used to serve in the Mech Corps. They'll fight. I'm confident of that."

"Your Avatars of Myth also fit that pattern." His assistant pointed out. "Maybe this crisis is a good opportunity for your Avatars to debut their prowess."

Ves had mixed feelings about that. He already held a conversation with Commander Melkor about this very topic.

Melkor pushed Ves to issue the first batches of his upcoming mech design to the Avatars! This was because the Avatar Commander itched to push his Avatars into answering the call and proving their valor on the battlefield!

It became very clear to Ves that Melkor and some of the Avatars were relatively discontent at the lack of action. Aside from performing routine mercenary assignments in order to put their practice to use, the Avatars hardly ever distinguished themselves in battle.

The lack of battle accomplishments shamed the Avatars!

While Ves was willing to let some of his Avatars perform some riskier missions, he wasn't quite sure about equipping them with his own products.

This was because his duty-based mech model served the lower end of the mech market! His Avatars who were frantically training to improve their proficiency in ranged combat in space would have to give up their strong and cozy premium mechs in favor of piloting humble budget mechs!

Cheap mechs didn't match the image he envisioned for his Avatars of Myth! How could he ever parade them around as an elite mech troop when they piloted mechs with average performance?

They simply didn't match!

Yet Ves also recognized that these were extraordinary circumstances. He couldn't let his Avatars stick to their existing mechs which were almost completely useless against the sandmen.

Perhaps only the Aurora Titans could stay in order to form a line of defense against the powerful but intermittent laser attacks of the sandmen.

"We all have to make sacrifices." Ves spoke. "Even my Avatars can't stand aside. If they are to fight on the battlefield, then I want to equip them with adequate mechs. My mechs."

That was all he could do. Perhaps he could design a variant that was slightly more expensive, but that would take too much effort. It was better if he focused completely on a single design.

During a crisis, everyone needed to make sacrifices.

The Avatars needed to settle for cheaper and lower-performing mechs to do their duty.

Gavin probably believed that he was doing his duty when Flashlight requested him to become their informer.

As a Larkinson and a Brighter, Ves felt compelled to return to the Bright Republic in order to do his duty to the best of his abilities.

Though no one acted in the best interests to themselves, Ves did not believe that they were doing something wrong.

There was honor in duty!

Nonetheless, the mech concept that Ves put forward was not entirely without problems. At the very least, it did nothing to mitigate the accusations that his products brainwashed people.

Instead, his mass-produced rifleman mechs would probably reinforce this notion!

"You'll be unleashing a monster as soon as you publish your design and put your mechs in the hands of your customers. Do you understand the

controversy your mech model will spark if it lives up to all of the promises you've made?"

A brief moment of silence stretched between the two. Ves was very well aware of what Gavin tried to warn.

"I know." Ves closed his eyes. "My mech can be used for both good and bad ends. This is something that I've always kept in mind."

"It's more than that, boss! A mech that inspires duty can also be regarded as a mech that encourages obedience! As soon as despots, tyrants and awful leaders catch wind of your new mech model, they'll doubtlessly abuse it to force their mech pilots or people into compliance!"

Ves stopped playing with Lucky and placed his cat to the side.

"Meow."

"Not now." He told his cat before turning back to Gavin. "I share your concerns, but the potential to misuse my products has always existed. I will not let these possibilities hinder me. It's not really my responsibility anyway. The fault lies within my customers."

"I'm not sure if everyone else will agree, boss. You will have to answer for yourself if the MTA or some other organization ever forms an inquiry into your new mech model. Even if you haven't tampered with the neural interfaces, there are too many parallels to the Farund Affair! The only thing that is different is that you're a lot better in hiding the exact mechanisms. It's as disingenuous as the Kinnners practising their slavery trade with a civilized coat!"

Woah! Gavin's argument truly landed a powerful impact on Ves. The analogy he used was simply too apt!

Nitaa, who always kept quiet, couldn't help but speak out against Gavin.

"Mr. Neumann, your description is uncalled for. The Kinner Tribe does not practice and has never condoned slavery."

"You're a slave in all but name!" Gavin pointed an accusatory finger at the tall bodyguard. "You're just too brainwashed to accept the truth! You think you are free, but your mind has been shackled since you were born! You never exercise your freedom because your Kinner Tribe trained you to accept exploitation!"

Though Nitaa was too professional to lash out in anger, her eyes fiercely glowered at Gavin. Her body shook and her armored hands were probably itching to beat up the outspoken assistant!

Ves knew he had to intervene before the matter escalated.

"Ahem!" Ves coughed. He deliberately spiked his Spirituality in order to strengthen his attempt to break up the tension in the room. "Benny, I understand your opinion with regards to my mech design, but these are difficult times. If I can provide a solution that can help the Bright Republic and other beleaguered states strengthen the resolve of their soldiers and citizens, then it is my duty for me to make it available!"

"Does expedience matter that much to you?! Is that why you gleefully pretend that Kinnners aren't what I say they are?!"

Ves frowned deeper and deeper. Though he partially agreed with Gavin's sentiment, this was not the time to let moral concerns stand in the way of his interests.

"Do you think I'm without conscience, Benny?"

Silence greeted his question.

Ves clapped his hand. "Let's adjourn this meeting. I think you need some time to cool that temper of yours."

"I.. I'm sorry boss. I'm a bit frustrated. The sandman invasion and all of the ripple effects that have ensued has really stressed me out. I'm not even sure that Cloudy Curtain can withstand the coming storm."

"That's why I suggest you enjoy a timeout. I value your opinions, but I've made my decision. I'll proceed to base my upcoming mech design around the concept of duty because that is what my customers need. As for the Kinners... please don't disrespect their culture."

To be honest, Ves only said that last part because he didn't want Gavin to give Nitaa and his other Kinners too many ideas.

Though Ves eventually wished to supplant the indoctrination imparted onto the Kinner with genuine loyalty towards him, this transition needed to be managed carefully.

Telling the Kinners straight-up that they were slaves and that they needed to break all of their mental shackles at once was not beneficial to him! He paid for them! He still wanted to get his money's worth out of his purchases!

The Kinners promised their human products would be loyal to their buyers for life, and Ves was damned if he let some nosy person accelerate their expiry dates!

Once Gavin left his stateroom, Ves sat up from his desk chair and began to pace around. Lucky playfully floated alongside his head as he did so. The cat tapped his head with his paws.

"Meow."

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "You're almost finished with digesting my P-stone?"

"Meow meow."

Lucky's cat swung back and forth as if he was proud of himself.

"I look forward to what you can produce. If it's something good, I'll definitely allow you to eat more P-stones in the future!"

"Meow!"

Ves had no idea what kind of gem Lucky might produce, but it would probably be related to spirituality. Any gem that Lucky produced shared at least some relations to what he consumed, though there were always exceptions. Random chance played a huge role in how Lucky's gems turned out.

Lucky's news helped lift his mood a little. Ves no longer directed any dark thoughts towards Gavin. He didn't know why his assistant became so confrontational all of a sudden and why Ves paid so much attention to it at the moment.

Was it because of the stress of maintaining double loyalties or did something else weigh on Gavin's mind?

Despite the uncharacteristic outburst, Ves still had no intentions of getting rid of Gavin.

"I should stop racking my brains over these issues and begin with designing my mech."

He decided to proceed to expand his mech concept and all of the other design choices he made so far into a unified vision.

Ves returned to his seat and leaned back as he focused on stimulating his imagination. Countless ideas flitted across his mind as he tried to form the right vision for his mech.

"What shall I call my new mech? It deserves a name at this stage."

A possible suggestion quickly arose from his mind.

"The Expedient Duty."

It was a fitting name, though a bit too literal to his tastes.

Ves eventually shook his head and rejected this option despite its appropriateness. "It's a bit too close to the truth. I don't want to advertise the true purpose of my mech so blatantly. I have to dress it up a little."

After all, he couldn't just outright say that his mech was meant to encourage people into performing their duty!

Chapter 1503 Common Soldiers Mech

After a long period of thought, Ves decided to call his next mech design the Desolate Soldier.

The name encapsulated his feelings on his upcoming mech design.

"The Desolate Soldier is not a flashy, expensive mech. It is not meant to pamper a mech pilot nor serve as trump cards."

Instead, Ves imagined the Desolate Soldiers deployed in large numbers in space. The ballistic rifleman mechs flew in formation and fired their rifles in measured salvos against distant but approaching sandman vessels.

From time to time, gigantic laser beams would strike the mechs. The mechs stood no chance of survival. The best a mech pilot could hope was if the laser beams struck far enough away from the cockpit to give them a chance of survival. Dodging and adopting an evasion pattern could only do so much.

"Every Desolate Soldier is disposable when it comes down to it. I just have to make sure their sacrifice is worth it and the other mechs will be able to finish the job."

Though his mechs were destined to be used as cannon fodder, Ves wanted to impart as much value as possible despite their constraints. He wanted to make the Desolate Soldier one of the best mech models in its price range.

"Applying my specialty is one of the means to increase its value, but not the only one. Pure performance is also an important component!"

Ves began to browse the component licenses his company currently held. Many of them were either outdated or not appropriate for the mech he envisioned.

"I'll have to invest some capital into acquiring some new licenses."

Fortunately, component licenses for cheaper mechs tended to be less sophisticated and therefore cheaper. In addition, everyone expected the transition to the next mech generation to happen very soon. Which mech designer was crazy enough to buy a soon-to-be-outdated component license at this time?

For this reason, many component licenses for low-tier mechs became dirt cheap. Their relatively low prices had already sunk down as the original developers or licensors wanted to milk their intellectual property as much as possible before they lost most of their value!

After a couple of hours of browsing the MTA's component catalog, Ves realized that he could get by with a full set of decent component licenses for less than a billion bright credits!

"That's still a lot of money, but not a problem for me or the LMC!"

Of course, the cost still posed a hindrance to Novices and Apprentices who operated smaller mech boutiques, but LMC easily bore the costs.

While it took a few hours of coordination with the headquarters of the LMC to obtain the licenses in their name, the deal was finally done.

Ves immediately began to puzzle together the newly-licensed component in a hasty draft design.

A preliminary version of the Desolate Soldier soon took shape! As Ves hastily slapped the parts together and formed them into a coherent mech frame, he began to look at his handiwork.

He hadn't really solidified his vision for his mech yet, so the current shape of the draft design wasn't reflective of his end goal.

Nonetheless, the draft closely matched his requirements.

"It's a solemn mech. It's a mech designed to serve its duty and encourage others to serve their duty."

An important style decision involved making the Desolate Soldier appear a lot more sober and utilitarian than his premium mech designs.

This was not a Crystal Lord, which Ves purposed as a mech for leaders and mech officers.

This was not an Aurora Titan, a mech designed to outperform nearly every other mech in a defensive capacity!

"My mech won't win any awards related to performance, that's for sure!"

This was a mech for the average grunt among mech pilots. Ves knew that a lot of melee specialists were in the process of retraining to become proficient in piloting ranged mechs right now.

All of these mech pilots weren't capable of bringing out the most in a powerful mech. What they needed more was a serviceable and dependable mech that did the job without costing too much.

The fairly plain sand-brown coating complemented its utilitarian aesthetic. Anyone looking at the Desolate Soldier would immediately know that it was solely designed to do its duty! Nothing more! Nothing less!

Though it went against his instincts to distinguish his products from the competition, in actual fact Ves believed that it was best if he stuck to a sober exterior design.

The draft design's appearance completely conformed to the tastes of the Bright Republic's mech market. Its utilitarian, military-inspired look not only made it easier to fabricate or repair the mech, but also minimized the chance of offending or repelling foreign customers.

While Ves mainly wished to serve the Bright Republic with his upcoming mech design, he also harbored ambitions to make it popular throughout the states under threat.

Throughout his current tour, Ves already noticed that many mech markets possessed different standards and tastes. Sometimes they diverged a lot, as was in the case of the Ylvaine Protectorate, but in most cases they never had a problem with neutral-looking mechs.

To an artist like Ves who liked to treat his mechs as his canvas, it was difficult for him to restrain himself from adding some visual flourishes to his mech. He did his best to hold himself back. If he began to go wild, the Desolate Soldier's complexity would increase, which not only made it more troublesome to fabricate its armor plating, but also increased the difficulty of fabricating replacement plating.

"Even if it adds an extra 100,000 bright credits to the total bill, that can make a huge difference if the Desolate Soldier is employed in huge numbers!"

Unlike his other premium mechs, Ves expected his customers to buy his Desolate Soldiers in batches rather than one at a time. The mech would be cheap enough to make it easy to buy them in numbers, and the advantages of doing so was significant.

If the Desolate Soldier made up the only ranged mech model of an outfit, then they could simplify their maintenance and logistical operations.

It was a lot less burdensome to maintain a single mech model rather than several at the same time! The outfit in question could just buy a single batch of spare parts and supplies to cover most of their needs without dealing with incompatibility issues.

Ves possessed plenty of practical experience on how outfits and mech regiments managed their maintenance operations. He put this knowledge to good use by refining the draft design in a way that minimized the amount of hassle the mech technicians dealt with on a daily basis.

The more he tinkered with his draft design, the more he noticed the difference of his recent upgrades. He already had a taste of it before when he designed the Sypre Helix Annihilator, but his upgraded Mechanics and Metallurgy Skills and his improved affinity of mechs both resulted in significant improvements!

Not only did he become more productive and finished his draft design faster, but he also elevated its quality to a higher level. Ves believed his current state could easily be a match to older and more experienced Journeymen who had been in the business for fifty or a hundred years!

"It's very fortunate I upgraded the right Skills first!"

At this moment, his Mechanics, Metallurgy and Physics Skills had all reached the level of a Senior. This meant that his foundation in these broad and expansive fields had reached a very high standard.

Though they didn't necessarily sound exotic or exciting, a good foundation was the key to designing an efficient mech that possessed as little flaws as possible. Ves could already judge from his draft design that if he refined it into a proper design, it would feature very little waste!

"This is incredibly important for a cheap mech like the Desolate Soldier! Compared to my premium mechs, I have to do more with less. I can't afford to waste a single material I put into my design!"

Though Ves thought highly of his Desolate Soldier, its actual performance would still be average even when compared to the other budget mechs on the market. Even if he differentiated his product by applying his specialty, he still needed to set a sharp price in order to make his new mech model viable in the highly-competitive market for ballistic rifleman mechs.

In other words, the Desolate Soldier's product margin would never be impressive. The LMC would be lucky if the margin reached twenty percent.

"That won't last forever." Ves grimly determined. "The timing of this mech design is awful. Once the new mech generation finally arrives, the Desolate Soldier will instantly be labeled as a lastgen mech!"

Once this change occurred, his company's profits would surely dwindle! If demand failed to take off for his new product, then retaining a five percent margin might be out of reach!

Ves considered this figure to be the minimum to make it worthwhile for the LMC to keep up production. If the company's profits for the Desolate Soldier fell below this threshold, then it might as well go back to producing copies of a popular licensed mech!

"This is going to be my greatest challenge." He muttered.

He set his sights on a target price at 20 to 24 million bright credits for his upcoming mech. This meant that he had to keep the production cost of a Desolate Soldier at 16 million bright credits or less!

Despite his various strengths, this was still a very steep challenge to Ves!

"Even Senior Mech Designers will have to strain their capabilities to depress the cost to this extent!"

A good foundation only went so far. If Ves wanted to squeeze more efficiency out of his Desolate Soldier design, then he needed to acquire more targeted expertise!

Perhaps it was time for him to upgrade some of his Sub-Skills!

"It's been awhile since I did that." He muttered.

The last time he upgraded his Skills was when he spent his DP on upgrading his Mechanics and Metallurgy Skills. Now that he finished their upgrade missions and digested them completely, he likely gained access to brand-new specialized Sub-Skills!

Ves considered both Mechanics and Metallurgy to be the most important fields in relations to his Desolate Soldier. It was a cheap and simple mech, which meant it did not feature any advanced or expensive gimmicks.

"The Desolate Soldier doesn't have enough room for complexity. I have to meet all of my targets while expending as little resources as possible! Expertise in how a mech is put together and how to make the most out of the available materials is a must!"

He temporarily paused his design work and headed to his bathroom, but not before grabbing Lucky. After he set up all of his precautions, he materialized his System comm and summoned its interface.

"Status."

Nothing much changed since he last checked it. He just wanted to check how much DP he accumulated.

Design Points: 430,213

"That's not as much as I thought." He frowned.

It made sense as soon as he thought about it. Sales of his existing mech models had collapsed. Ever since the LMC switched over to producing a licensed mech design, Ves no longer earned any DP. He couldn't even expect to gain anything from virtual mech sales as they had already reached the limits set by the System!

There was nothing he could do about it except to finish his Desolate Soldier design as fast as possible.

After a brief moment of consideration, he decided to set his purchasing budget at 300,000 DP!

"That's a lot of design points!"

Nonetheless, Ves believed he needed to spend extravagantly in order to make his goal of reducing the cost of his upcoming mech design a reality. The Sub-Skills he acquired today would not only be useful for his current design project, but every project that followed!

"My investment won't be in vain." He consoled himself.

He turned to the System's Skill Tree.

An entire tree of Skills and Sub-Skills branched out from each direction. Compared to last time, the lower branches of his Skill Tree had expanded significantly. Ves observed numerous new Sub-Skills.

Though some of them sounded very attractive, the amount of DP the System charged for them was correspondingly high!

Ves quickly frowned. "I don't necessarily need them. I'll just be muddling up my design philosophy if I learn too many irrelevant Skills."

He decided to focus on the basics. A Skill that was a bit more general and widely-applicable would not introduce any incompatibilities with his distinctive design style.

He aimed to select a handful of Sub-Skills that could make a small but very noticeable difference in his efforts to increase the efficiency of his mech designs.

He happily hummed while he slowly inspected his options.

Chapter 1504 Sharing is Caring

Ves felt a bit guilty for enjoying the shopping process. He knew that it would be detrimental to his future development if he became too dependent on the System.

Despite his conviction to save up his DP to lessen his dependence and to reserve his fortune for big expenditures, in the end he gave in to his urges.

He felt a bit bad at himself for choosing the easy option. Other mech designers had to spend years of study and practice in order to master these new Skills, while Ves merely spent the System's fantasy currency to acquire it all in a day!

He sighed. "It's really not fair to other mech designers."

Normally, he didn't care about that, but ever since he got a girlfriend, he began to think a little bit more on what this difference might do to his relationship. As much as he wanted to one-up Gloriana and stay ahead of her, it would be very sad if he kept growing at a rapid pace while leaving his girlfriend far behind.

Was it truly a good idea if he deprived the love of his life benefits of the System?

He frequently grappled with this problem in his thoughts. If he truly loved a woman and that woman loved him back, then Ves felt obligated to extend his trust to her. After all, if he truly loved someone, he wanted to provide for her and make her happy!

While Ves wasn't sure if he would ever be able to reach this point with Gloriana, he had to take the possibility into account. Whatever the future might bring, he eventually foresaw that he would no longer keep the System completely to himself.

"System... can you have multiple users at the same time?"

[Affirmative. Permission to utilize the Mech Designer System will only be granted to worthy mech designers.]

For once, the System answered his question! Not only that, it confirmed one of the suspicions that he always held!

Just like the Metal Scroll of the past, the System was capable of enlightening multiple people at a time! The only reason why Ves hadn't realized this sooner was because he was far too selfish and paranoid to even think about sharing the System with others!

"How will multiple people be able to access you?"

[The Mech Designer System can only be accessed through this comm.]

He let out a sigh in relief upon hearing this answer. By limiting access to the System through the comm it inhabited, Ves retained full control over it. Just because he was potentially willing to share the System didn't mean he wanted others to hijack it! The System was far too valuable to leave in other people's hands!

"Thanks for answering my questions, System."

Once he satisfied his curiosity, Ves turned his attention back to the Skill Tree. He started his shopping spree by attempting to upgrade his Structural Pathway Configuration Sub-Skill.

The System immediately denied his request.

[Your Structural Pathway Configuration IV cannot be improved until your Electrical Engineering has reached Senior-level.]

Ves cursed a bit. "Make that a little bit more clear, then!"

He wanted to improve his ability to design the internal architecture of his mech by upgrading this Sub-Skill, but it turned out that he missed a prerequisite. While he could instantly spend 100,000 to upgrade his Electrical Engineering Skill to Senior-level, Ves wouldn't gain anything until he completed an Upgrade Mission.

"I don't have the time to divert my attention to Upgrade Missions." He grumbled. "If I can't obtain the benefits immediately, then my DP is best spent somewhere else."

Even if he rushed the Upgrade Mission and completed it quickly, it still took around two weeks to integrate and digest his newly-upgraded Skill!

All the while, he needed to divert at least a portion of his attention elsewhere, which would reduce his productivity while he worked on his design project!

Ves shook his head. "I should stick to what I can use immediately."

He limited his selection a little and decided to upgrade something basic but very relevant in the current circumstances.

[Ballistic Weapon Optimization I]: 500 DP

[Ballistic Weapon Optimization II]: 1,000 DP

[Ballistic Weapon Optimization III]: 2,000 DP

[Ballistic Weapon Optimization IV]: 4,000 DP

[Ballistic Weapon Optimization V]: 50,000 DP

"Since I'm about to design a ballistic rifleman mech, it's a good idea for me to obtain in-depth knowledge on ballistic weapon systems!"

This was just one of many Sub-Skills relating to ballistic rifles and cannons. While other Sub-Skills allowed him to work with better and more specialized ballistic weapon systems, Ves valued its emphasis on optimization.

Ves didn't plan to equip his Desolate Soldier design with a complex weapon! Just like every other aspect of the mech, he wanted its rifle to be as simple and cheap as possible!

"Optimization is key!"

Since he worked with a generous budget, he immediately acquired Ballistic Weapon Optimization V. The moment he confirmed the exchange, a spike drove into his mind!

"Ah!"

A flood of knowledge poured into his mind and integrated with his knowledge. Different from last time, Ves managed to bear the transfer. Compared to receiving Senior-level Mechanics and Metallurgy at the same time, this little burden was nothing!

He laughed. "Hahaha! You can't defeat me anymore, System! You almost broke my mind once, but what doesn't kill me makes me stronger!"

Just like exercising muscles, Ves believed that his mind became more resilient once he pushed it to its limits and beyond. As long as his mind healed back the damage, it became a little bit more capable of withstanding the same stresses.

Soon enough, Ves digested the bulk of the knowledge transfer. He absorbed all kinds of details about ballistic weapons, from the most fundamental theories to the more advanced ones ordinarily learned by Seniors!

There was a huge jump in price for many Sub-Skills upgraded to the fifth tier. Though Ballistic Weapon Optimization V required him to cough up 50,000 DP,

which was more than most Masteries, Ves quickly confirmed that he hadn't spent his DP in vain.

The amount of tricks he gained with regards to ballistic weapon systems gave him a lot of confidence in pairing his Desolate Soldier with a good rifle!

"This is good stuff!"

Unfortunately, it cost an even more ludicrous amount of DP to upgrade this Sub-Skill again!

"Let's look at something else."

Once he finished internalizing his new Sub-Skill, he began to turn his attention towards the Metallurgy branch. He needed to gain a good amount of proficiency in working with metals and alloys in order to minimize excess use of materials.

[Fixed Armor Specialization II]: 20,000 DP

[Fixed Armor Specialization III]: 40,000 DP

Fixed Armor Specialization was a more expensive optimization Sub-Skill, so Ves only dared to upgrade it twice.

Of course, Ves gained a lot of knowledge. Virtually every mech that Ves worked with featured fixed armor systems, so the applicability of what he just acquired was a lot better than his first purchase, which only played a role with mechs armed with ballistic weapon systems!

"This isn't enough. I need something more to achieve greater savings in my next mech design!"

He first contemplated acquiring Sub-Skills related to tweaking existing alloy formulas or developing new ones. However, it took a lot of time to develop a formula that improved upon the original.

Ves didn't specialize in armor systems. He couldn't care less about developing custom alloy formulas for his mech designs. He was already fine with licensing existing ones to skip all of that hard work.

After a bit of browsing, he decided to acquire something that sounded very useful.

[Internal Structure Specialization I]: 75,000 DP

Ves unlocked the option to obtain Internal Structure Specialization I after his Metallurgy reached Senior. As soon as he exchanged this Sub-Skill, he immediately began to immerse himself.

The Sub-Skill delved very deep in the materials used to prop up the internal structure of a mech. He rapidly learned the fine art of how to design an efficient structure and how to tweak the composition of materials to achieve their maximum effect!

What he just learned complemented his Structural Pathway Configuration IV Sub-Skill very well! The possibilities opened up by what he just learned allowed him to develop a finer internal structure that used up less materials without reducing the integrity of his designs!

Once he finished his new knowledge, he briefly checked his DP.

"I've spent almost 200,000 DP!"

That was too much considering how much time had passed! It felt a bit surreal to him how easily he spent months worth of accumulation. He already ate through two-thirds of his budget!

Ves needed to be a bit more careful in spending the remainder of his budget.

For a moment, he contemplated on upgrading some of his smaller and more neglected Sub-Skills. He even thought about upgrading one of his Apprentice or Journeyman-level Skills.

"I should get something cheap."

[Computer Science - Journeyman]: 4,000 DP

The amount of programming knowledge he gained was considerable compared to how little DP he just spent. Though learning how to program a mech felt a bit uncomfortable to Ves, it was a bit better than before.

Ever since he clarified his design philosophy and identified the different paths available to him, he no longer objected as much to the thought of controlling his creations. The path of determination was particularly receptive to programming-related Skills and Sub-Skills.

"I see! My inclinations can change depending on where my design philosophy stands!"

Upgrading his Computer Science Skill did not matter too much for him right now. He planned to use a standardized, off-the-shelf operating system for his Desolate Soldier design because he didn't have the time to program something more fitting.

"It really doesn't add any value to simple mechs. Custom software only really makes a difference when I design a complex mech." He muttered.

He turned to the Mechanics branch, which he hadn't touched until now. He possessed remarkably few Sub-Skills, which he found to be a considerable mismatch due to its central role in mechs.

[Fine Motion Control I]: 75,000 DP

The Sub-Skill he chose was another one that became available when his Mechanics Skill reached the Senior-level. While Fine Motion Control I did not sound very exciting, it was exceptionally useful for his current project.

This was because it increases his knowledge on how to make his ranged mechs more accurate! As long as the mech pilots possessed enough skill, they could apply their marksmanship to a greater degree to his mechs!

As for the less-skilled mech pilots, Ves gained more expertise on how to tweak his mechs to make it easier for them to hit their targets.

The knowledge he absorbed was quite extensive and encompassed many different kinds of mechs, not just ranged ones.

Though melee mechs mostly emphasized forceful movements, there was still a role for finer control, particularly with mechs that relied on finesse such as light skirmishers.

Now that he spent the bulk of his budget, he contemplated whether he should spend his DP on a Mastery.

"Nah." Ves shook his head. "It's nice, but I don't think I need it. My other Mastery Skills already provide me with a sufficient amount of overlap."

He knew he'd be able to gain some benefits if he acquired another Mastery, but Ves couldn't afford to waste his time on another lengthy Mastery experience.

Though he could afford to spend the DP, his time was much more scarce!

Ves decided to leave the Masteries available to him for another day and proceeded to search for something that provided immediate benefits.

[Simulations I]: 1,000 DP

[Simulations II]: 2,000 DP

[Simulations III]: 5,000 DP

[Simulations IV]: 10,000 DP

He turned to a Sub-Skill under Mathematics this time. Though the Simulations Sub-Skill sounded very basic, it brought an incredible amount of value for a very little price.

Simulations IV enabled him to become a lot more proficient in running simulations! Though his other Sub-Skills already granted him knowledge of many different mathematical models, acquiring this last Sub-Skill allowed him to tie them all together with as few contradictions as possible!

"Basically, I can achieve a lot more results in my simulation work!"

The proficiency he gained in running simulations allowed him to skip weeks or months worth of monotonous virtual tests. This was vitally important for him as he wanted to waste as little time as possible in optimizing his mech design!

This was it! He spent almost 300,000 DP, exhausting most of his reserves. It would take a long time for him to earn back so many Design Points. Ves continually winced at how much he spent despite knowing that the knowledge he gained was worth every point.

"If I can't design a good ballistic rifleman mech after learning so much new stuff, then I'm a disgrace of a Journeyman!"

Chapter 1505 Earning Acceptance

Ves took some time off to grow more comfortable with his expanded knowledge base. He looked at reality a bit more different now that he learned so many new theories.

Though he became ecstatic at all of the knowledge he acquired, he knew that it would take a lot of time and practice to increase his utilization of what he learned.

Just because he stuffed his head full of theories didn't mean he would be able to use them to the fullest effect.

He hadn't even made full use of his recently-upgraded Mechanics and Metallurgy Skills yet. Now he compounded his problem by adding a bunch of new Sub-Skills.

"It's fine." He sighed. "Even if I'm fairly inefficient in applying my knowledge, I'm better off than before. That's enough."

Ves merely wanted to improve his ability to design the Desolate Soldier. He accomplished this goal with his latest round of upgrades. As for the repercussions, Ves believed he would naturally be able to mitigate them over the course of his work.

That was because once he returned home, he planned to go on a design spree! The start of a new mech generation was the best time for him to design lots of mechs! With the mech market in flux, any early mech model could rise to become the market leader in a state or region!

Therefore, Ves didn't worry about lacking practice. The biggest benefit to being an independent mech designer was that he could dictate his own work, after all.

"Filling up my mech catalog is not only good practice, but also good business. It's about time the LMC offers a complete line of mechs!"

He needed to have an expansive design team to manage so many projects at once, but that was a problem for later. For now, the urgency of the situation required him to devote himself fully to his Desolate Soldier project.

Though Ves already laid the groundwork for the technical design aspects of his mech, he still hadn't fully addressed its spiritual aspect.

Ves already planned to make use of Nyxie's spiritual fragment as the base of a new spiritual product. The only reason he hesitated was because the spiritual product would certainly become a poor fit if he only relied on spiritual energy from Nyxie and himself.

Nyxie's spiritual attributes were full of arrogance, tyranny and a vast number of alien attributes. His own spiritual attributes were also messy, and his mech-related spiritual attributes were too general to align his spiritual product with the Desolate Soldier.

"What I need is a third ingredient that can impart the necessary spiritual attributes to make my spiritual product fit my mech design!"

That almost certainly meant that he needed to go out and find an expert pilot who specialized in spaceborn ballistic rifleman mechs.

The good news was that Ves already identified a bunch of them in an earlier search. Though a lot of information about expert pilots tend to be classified, sometimes their base of operations were known.

Ves wanted to borrow a spiritual fragment from an expert pilot for more than just their affinity towards spaceborn rifleman mechs.

"Many expert pilots are known for their strong sense of duty!"

States often invested a lot of effort and resources in shaping the thoughts of expert candidates and expert pilots. To put it in a more uncharitable way, they indoctrinated their expert pilots so that they became extremely loyal to their state!

Ves realized that this was no secret and happened everywhere. Venerable Xie who was unflinchingly loyal to Prince Hixt-Klaaster was a good example.

Of course, the level of indoctrination didn't go too far. No one dared to cross the line set by the MTA and brainwash their expert pilots as extensively as the Kinners did to their own tribesmen.

"They are still somewhat similar, though."

Ves wanted to obtain and amplify the sense of duty in his spiritual product.

He couldn't get it from Nyxie's spiritual fragment because the alien entity was far too tyrannical to accept subservience.

He also couldn't get it from himself because Ves was not someone who blindly answered to authority.

If his Desolate Soldiers inherited his own sense of duty, then they would definitely become disasters in the making!

Ves already had a target in mind who fit all of his criteria. He only needed to inform Captain Silvestra to alter their course and divert to a specific star system which hosted a specific military base.

The only reason he hadn't done so already was because he continued to mull over Gavin's words.

Though Gavin's outburst was a bit uncalled for, Ves frequently mulled over his words.

"He's right to question whether it's right for me to design my mech this way." He rubbed his head.

He was thankful that Gavin brought up his analogy. By mentioning the Kinner practice of brainwashing their own tribesmen into becoming human products made available for hire or for sale, Ves grasped the key to keep his mech legal!

"Why do the Kinnners get away with their practices?" Ves suddenly asked Nitaa. "Surely, people have lodged accusations at your tribe for engaging in slavery."

"The Kinner Tribe does not practice slavery, sir." Nitaa admonished him. "Our practices are legal. We have many customers, many of whom support our industry."

"That is the key!"

"The key to what, sir?"

"The support of your customers is the main reason why your Kinner Tribe hasn't been forced to change their practices! Perhaps many people find your tribe's primary industry to be distasteful, but you have a lot of powerful customers from all over the Komodo Star Sector. With so much foreign support and political cover, the critics of your tribe are rendered helpless!"

Pissing off the Kinner Tribe meant pissing off all of the powerful and wealthy people who bought the human products. There was no way they wanted their assets to become prohibited and lose value overnight!

The Kinner Tribe managed to unite many different states and allied individuals in support of their practices. The broad network of supporters they cultivated was enough to shield them from criticism!

His eyes lit up as he realized that he could make use of their example to solve not only his current problem, but also his future problems!

Though he hadn't returned home yet, Ves received frequent reports on the accusations lodged against the LMC's mechs. How many sales had his company lost because his customers bought into the conspiracy theories?

Though Ves and the LMC could issue as many denials as they liked, the effect would be limited. After all, it was a given that he would support his own products!

He grinned. "It's a different matter if other authorities put in a good word!"

As long as he cultivated support among his customers, he could mitigate the damage and even neutralize it to a great extent! This was because a mech that revolved around duty was exactly what was needed to address the current crisis!

"If something is illegal but also highly needed, it won't stay illegal for long!"

As long as he managed to obtain the buy-in of many powerful individuals by making them value his Desolate Soldiers, then they would naturally back him up! Just like how the Kinner Tribe's polite form of slavery earned acceptance, Ves wanted his Desolate Soldiers and other mech designs to be accepted as well!

"All I have to do is to make my Desolate Soldier model indispensable to the desperate states whose citizens are wavering!"

Ves predicted that his Desolate Soldiers would enjoy a lot more demand in weaker and more unstable states such as the Reinald Republic. The Bright Republic on the other hand did not lack in fighting will, but even the Desolate Soldiers could still play a role in keeping morale high.

He felt a lot better about himself and his current design project now that he came up with a way to solve this increasingly more intractable problem.

Though the solution sounded a bit distasteful due to its parallels to the Kinner Tribe's practises, at least it had been proven to work!

"Heh, there's no need for me to trouble my conscience any further." He grinned. "It's fine as long as it works!"

He began to enact some of his plans. First, he contacted Captain Silvestra to divert to a specific star system.

"Sir, this course adjustment will delay our arrival to the Hertog Dominion by several days."

"That's fine. Some business has come up and I really need to stop by this star system."

Once he did that, he began to work on his mech design. While he hadn't created his spiritual product beforehand, Ves believed it was fine if he created it later. He already had a very good vision in mind.

If his spiritual product didn't conform to his mech design, then Ves would simply hammer it into shape by force!

"Whatever. I can't waste any time!"

The border states already started falling like dominoes and it was only a matter of time until the sandman invasion reached the third line of defense. Ves needed to be ready to publish the Desolate Soldiers by that time!

Though Ves came under a significant amount of pressure, he never saw that as a detriment. He threw himself in his work and converted his draft design into a proper design.

Starting with the internal frame, Ves immediately fleshed out a proper internal architecture for his mech. Despite the lack of quality materials and components, Ves easily worked around the limitations.

Due to his expanded knowledge base, older problems which frequently forced him to pause and think up a solution no longer hindered him any longer. A Sub-Skill such as Internal Structure Specialization I provided him with so many theories and approaches that he rarely resorted to improvised solutions in his current design project.

"What a time saver!"

One of the principal reasons why he spent so much time on designing his mechs was that he often had to puzzle out solutions to difficult problems. With so many choices available to him, Ves had to develop several different alternatives at once and calculate which ones delivered the best results.

All of that took valuable time and effort. Yet now that he gained a number of relevant Sub-Skills, he no longer needed to reinvent the wheel all the time!

While Ves recognized that developing his own solutions by hand were valuable learning experiences, he couldn't care less about developing his own solutions right now.

He just wanted to design the soundest and most efficient iteration of the Desolate Soldier that he could accomplish!

The amount of time he saved with his selection of upgrades was considerable. What took three months to design back when he was just an Apprentice now took only three weeks!

Time flowed like water as Ves completely immersed himself into designing his Desolate Soldier. The mech looked increasingly more detailed and real with every passing day. The more his mech design approached his vision, the more enthusiastic he became about completing his work.

His passion burned like wildfire, motivating him into working faster while also encouraging him to put more of his heart into his efforts!

Even if he didn't pair his Desolate Soldier with a living design spirit, its inherent X-Factor already carried a strong hint of duty and the other traits that Ves wanted to impart into his work.

Ves believed it was his duty to design the Desolate Soldier! He was doing the Bright Republic and the Komodo Star Sector a huge favor by making his vision into reality!

Soon enough, Ves rapidly completed the basic design of the mech frame. By keeping the design as simple as possible, he saved himself a lot of work.

Even though he aimed to keep the mech frame simple, the Desolate Soldier was anything but a shallow mech. Its internal and external structures incorporated many ingenious nuances derived from all of the advanced theories he recently acquired.

"If a Senior could see my work, they would probably suspect that I borrowed the assistance of one of their own kind!"

He was anything but done, though. Not only did he have to pair his mech frame with a fitting ballistic rifle, he also had to subject his design through a large barrage of tests in order to refine and optimize his work.

Even so, Ves was well on his way to completing his mech design on schedule! He might even be able to finish it ahead of schedule if he skimmed on the iteration process!

Chapter 1506 Spiritual Heis

A large parade took place on the main boulevard of a space station orbiting Crenas III in the Hertog Dominion. A mech regiment called the Caraban Fusiliers received orders to deploy to the other side of the state in order to defend against the encroaching sandmen.

Though the Hertog Dominion was a very centralized state, there was a lot of discontent among the masses. The rulers mainly relied on their strong grip on the military and other levers of authority to keep their people in line.

For this reason, the Dominion placed a huge emphasis on military parades.

Today, the Caraban Fusiliers would be walking down some of their mechs and men on foot through the central boulevard in the expansive space station. A huge crowd had gathered along the path under extremely heavy guard. No one was allowed to enter without undergoing inspection!

Though many people didn't like the way the Hertog Dominion was ruled, there were still plenty of die hard supporters among the population. The most enthusiastic locals all drummed out to the parade to wave flags while cheering on their soldiers.

As their name suggested, the Caraban Fusiliers mainly fielded ranged mechs. One of the reasons why the military planners decided to deploy the Fusiliers

so early despite the distance to the frontlines was because they were immediately effective against the sandmen.

Though a fair number of their mechs were mainly used on laser rifles, it wasn't very difficult to swap out their weapons for ballistic versions.

Some of their mechs had already been modified to carry more ammunition by adding external harnesses to them. It was a quick and dirty stopgap solution that turned them into huge hazards when hit.

Perfect against sandmen, but not so much against human foes.

Ves visited the space station but did not attend the parade. Instead, he conducted an exchange with a random Journeyman elsewhere on the space station. They reserved a private conference room at an upscale hotel to exchange their insights.

The older man Ves met specialized in laser weapons, which happened to be completely useless during this time. Not only that, but the Hertoger withheld much of his valuable theories and only threw out scraps.

Having exchanged with many different mech designers, Ves knew when his counterpart tried to scam him. It didn't matter to him though, because he only insisted on holding an exchange to give him an alibi.

He diverted a minute part of his concentration to appear attentive and engaged when the stingy Journeyman explained nonsense. He instead devoted the majority of his mind into reaching into the imaginary realm.

He already studied his target extensively. Though the Caraban Fusiliers were ordinarily stationed at an inaccessible military space station, the public parade was a rare opportunity for civilians and bystanders to meet them in the flesh!

Ves needed this proximity. Even with the information he gathered about the Caraban Fusiliers and their only expert pilot, he wouldn't be able to identify Venerable Zoe Plinter's presence in the imaginary realm until he came close.

He mentally resolved to find a way to improve his interactions with spiritually-powerful entities in the imaginary realm. The range limitations really started to grate at him. He needed to develop a better way to track and make contact with expert pilots so that he could borrow their spiritual fragments with much less hassle.

As the parade proceeded in full swing, a wave of enthusiasm followed as Venerable Zoe Plinter's iconic Crax Shooter mech walked down the boulevard. The spaceborn expert mech walked with its wings folded up and its massive overengineered rifle cradled in its arms.

The reason why Ves targeted Venerable Plinter was that she was a devoted lackey of the state. Having risen through the ranks from a modest background, the Hertog Dominion invested heavily in her once she advanced to expert candidate by luck.

From everything he read about Venerable Plinter, she was as loyal to her state as Venerable Foster was to hers. The biggest difference between the two women was that Plinter was older and a lot less aggressive.

All in all, Venerable Plinter earned a lot of accolades from the Dominion for her loyalty and willingness to answer to authority.

Not every expert pilot wanted to remain humble after they became a demigod. Cases where expert pilots demanded extravagant treatment or outright went rogue still took place from time to time.

"Are you listening?" The old Journeyman probed.

Ves briefly drew back a part of himself. "Of course. I'm just a bit skeptical about your proposal to make multi-barrel laser rifles standard. It isn't worth it to add so much extra complexity just to gain some extra redundancy."

"Why are you so afraid of complexity?! Just because something consists of more parts doesn't mean it's worth less than a simpler weapon!"

As the man rambled on, Ves returned the bulk of his attention to his explorations of the imaginary realm.

Despite entering a densely-populated space station, Ves hardly encountered anything spiritual at all. The few people who possessed undeveloped spiritual potential barely registered to his senses at all.

Only a single presence shone like a beacon through the corrosive winds in this desolate realm.

There.

One reason why Venerable Zoe Plinter received so much attention from the government was that she had grown to be one of the stronger expert pilots in the Dominion. As soon as Ves' spiritual projection approached, he immediately sensed that this rumor was true!

Strong! She was stronger than Venerable Foster by virtue of her age and experience!

Ves briefly grimaced. He knew this was going to be a bit costly. He patted the box resting on his lap and casually opened it to slip his hand inside. He briefly touched the F-stone stored inside the container and drew a slight charge, just five percent.

Five percent was a steep cost to impart his spiritual energy with an offensive attribute, but he considered it a necessary price to pay. There was no way he

could ever make a dent in the defenses of a conscious and alert expert pilot of Zoe Plinter's caliber!

He attempted to concentrate his newly-acquired charge onto a spiritual knife. He mostly failed as he couldn't apply any influence onto the charge. He lacked the appropriate technique to alter his spiritual energy in such a fashion!

Ves sighed and decided to work with what he had. In any case, his spiritual knife was already strong enough to harm an expert pilot's spirituality in his eyes.

As he lamely tried to keep the exchange going, deep within the imaginary realm he shot his spiritual knife forward in the direction of a strong spiritual fortification.

Ves sensed that the spiritual fortification in the shape of a spiked shell detected his approach. It quickly firmed up and readied its defenses. Spikes already started to shoot out in the direction of his spiritual knife!

The knife, empowered with a potent offensive charge, cut through all of the spikes in its way without any effort! Its razor-sharp edge couldn't be stopped with such a feeble defensive measure!

Before the spiritual fortification could employ a better defense, Ves' knife had closed the distance and instantly pierced through the surface of the outer shell.

In the middle of the parade taking place kilometers away, the Crax Shooter suddenly stumbled and halted in place. As the crowd wondered why the prized expert mech of the Caraban Fusiliers halted, the soldiers and station guards quickly received an alert.

Something went wrong! They had to evacuate the crowd!

As a mild warning tone rang throughout the space station, the station guards quickly began to usher the confused well wishers away. In the meantime, the soldiers in the parade began to help push away the crowd while forming a defensive perimeter around the inactive Crax Shooter.

The warning tone even reached the hotel where Ves and the Hertoger Journeyman conducted their exchange.

Ves pretended to be perplexed at the sudden change in events. "Is there something wrong?"

"I'm not sure." The other man frowned. "Let me get in touch with my contacts. Something might have happened during the parade."

As the Hertoger checked his comm, Ves used the reprieve to devote his full attention towards his attack.

His spiritual knife had already started to cut relentlessly into the fortification like it was butter. Ves discovered that the enhancement he received from the F-stone was more potent than he thought!

Something capable of allowing him to inflict damage on a powerful ancient alien entity such as Nyxie would definitely be effective against an expert pilot no matter their strength!

As a louder alarm began to ring throughout the space station, Ves hurried up his efforts. He cut a crude and jagged circle into Venerable Plinter's spiritual presence. He felt a bit greedy at the start so tried to cut a larger spiritual fragment than he strictly planned to obtain.

The damage he inflicted to the expert pilot was probably great, but he couldn't care less about that at the moment!

"We need to evacuate, Mr. Larkinson." The Journeyman suddenly stood up. "The space station will go under lockdown soon. I can get you out if you follow me. I'm friends with one of the station administrators."

"Please lead the way." Ves smiled and stood up as well. "Do you know what's going on?"

"My contacts aren't sure. All they know is that an unknown assailant attempted to attack the Caraban Fusiliers."

As their bodyguards began to usher them out of the hotel suite, Ves quickly finished his efforts. Though his spiritual knife endured continuous counterattacks that bled his spiritual energy, he finally managed to cut out a fragment!

Having accomplished this, Ves morphed his spiritual knife into a hand and grabbed hold of the loosened fragment before dragging it away from its original owner!

He drew back his newly-gained fragment into his mind but didn't let it rest. Instead, he pushed fragment out of his mind and deposited it in the P-stone stored in a container attached to Nitaa's backpack module.

Success!

Ves tried his best not to smile in satisfaction. He did his best to look concerned and afraid as he followed his host.

Hours later, a shuttle reached the Barracuda and deposited its passengers. Once he entered his ship, he immediately took his spoils to the lab. All the way, only Lucky and Nitaa accompanied him throughout the trip.

The cat floated on top of a lab machine and perched himself there. As for Nitaa, she keenly observes Ves as he grinned at his newly-occupied P-stone.

While Ves hadn't explained anything to her, Nitaa "Were you responsible for what had just occurred?"

The lab compartment was already isolated, so Ves decided to be charitable for once and nodded. "Yes."

A brief pause followed as Ves continued to study the spiritual fragment he obtained. His smile widened as its spiritual attributes strongly aligned with what he wanted to obtain! Not only did it mesh well with ballistic rifleman mechs, but it also possessed a strong attribute related to duty!

The only issue was that the spiritual fragment likely contained some attributes that he couldn't identify and likely weren't relevant for his project.

He expected to obtain something like this. Like an unprocessed mineral, Ves deliberately carved out a larger-than-usual fragment because he anticipated that he needed to refine it into a purer form.

"What did you do, exactly?"

Ves briefly looked up from his inspection. "You're oddly curious."

"My apologies. It's difficult for me to anticipate threats if I am not aware of what you are doing."

Though Ves was loath to explain what he was doing, he figured he should at least extend some trust to one of his most loyal employees. Ves never sensed any duplicity from her. If he wanted to build up his inner circle, then he needed to cultivate true trust among his closest people.

"Let's just say that I borrowed something valuable from the expert pilot of the Caraban Fusiliers. I'll be in trouble if they find out, so we're departing the Crenas System immediately."

His explanation barely satisfied Nitaa's curiosity, but Ves believed he was already being forthright enough by revealing this much information!

"I.. see, sir." She spoke, knowing that she wouldn't be able to get anything more out of the man she served. "Could you warn me the next time you undertake such a risky operation?"

Ves sighed. "I should have warned you from the start. I'll make sure to notify you the next time I do something like that. You deserve that much, at least."

"Thank you, sir."

Chapter 1507 Spiritual Lobotomization

Ves was new to spiritual engineering and only possessed a superficial understanding of this field. The spiritual techniques he developed beforehand mostly consisted of straightforward applications.

"Child's play." He scoffed.

He merely dipped his toes into spiritual engineering so far. Even creating his first spiritual product known as Vescas had been more of an accident than something created with conscious intent.

This time, he intended to rectify some of the flaws in his crude spiritual restoration technique.

"Just like regular engineering, the raw materials play a large part in determining what is possible." He whispered to himself.

He looked thoughtfully at the containers placed in front of him. All three of them stored P-stones.

One P-stone acted as his current spiritual energy battery. After several weeks of accumulation, it stored more excess spiritual energy than what was currently contained within his mind!

Another P-stone held the spiritual fragment he accidentally retrieved from Nyxie. Due to the alien spiritual entity's intense hostility and strength, Ves always kept it inside the B-stone lockbox.

The last P-stone held his newly-obtained spiritual fragment from Venerable Plinter. Though it tried its best to escape, the fragment lacked the strength to overcome the P-stone's attraction force.

All three P-stones held the raw materials that Ves intended to combine together to form his second spiritual product. His goal was to create an artificial living spiritual entity that contained all of the properties he desired!

The closer his spiritual product aligned with his vision for his Desolate Soldier mech, the greater its impact on the market. Ves banked on its aura of his mech to be both strong and pure enough to inspire a sense of duty among the people in its area of effect.

In order to accomplish this, Ves had to treat his raw materials.

"There is too much garbage in my raw materials. I have to filter them out as much as possible before I combine them together."

If he did not do so, he would end up with a product like Vescas who retained far too many traits from the Dragoncat and himself. While that wasn't necessarily a bad thing for a mech like the Kinslayer, Ves wanted to produce something purer and more focused for his Desolate Soldiers.

"The Desolate Soldier is a mass-production mech intended to be sold in great numbers. I have a duty to make sure that my work is as efficient as possible in performing its functions!"

Ves did not wish to impart his next mech design with a mixed and unfocused X-Factor. The only method he could think up to avoid this outcome was to subtract the undesirable elements from his raw materials before he merged them together.

"It's not the best solution, but it's the only option available to me." He grimaced. "The waste will be incredible."

He walked over to the container holding the P-stone that contained Venerable Plinter's spiritual fragment. He already checked the local news, but the Hertogers didn't report anything about the expert pilot's condition.

He didn't need any confirmation to know that Venerable Plinter's condition should be quite severe. Ves cut off a large chunk of her spirituality, after all. There was no way she could recover in a short amount of time!

In fact, the incident was so severe that the Caraban Fusiliers already postponed their deployment to the frontlines!

Ves felt a little guilty about that. He deprived the Hertog Dominion of one of its strongest defenders. It would take several months or years for Venerable Plinter to recover from the damage.

By that time, the Hertog Dominion might have already fallen from the onslaught of sandmen!

Though Ves didn't believe that his intervention had inadvertently caused the downfall of this state, he hadn't done the Hertogers any favors.

"It's for a good cause." He muttered. "Your sacrifice will not be in vain. Even if you failed your duty to your state, you should at least be content with doing your duty to the other beleaguered states in our star sector!"

The excuse he came up with was sufficient to wash away his guilt. He turned back to his work and focused his efforts on the spiritual fragment.

He studied Venerable Plinter's spiritual fragment carefully. He relied heavily on his judgement and feelings to guess at its spiritual attributes. He tentatively identified those he wanted to make use of and those he failed to identify and wanted to discard.

Ves formed a spiritual projection and began to operate on the spiritual fragment, for lack of a better word. Through various ways, he tried to concentrate and gather unwanted spiritual energy with undesirable attributes.

It was difficult. Normally, the attributes possessed a natural tendency to disperse evenly.

How could he possibly draw out the junk while leaving the more valuable spiritual attributes in place?

After a bit of experimentation, Ves developed a costly new technique called selective spiritual attraction. Knowing that he could afford to use up his spiritual energy, he began to form a spiritual mask that overwhelmingly concentrated certain traits. He spent a considerable amount of spiritual energy to empower this new mark.

Instead of donning the mask over his mind, he instead wrapped it around a strong spiritual projection. The two spiritual entities fused with each other, forming a detached, intangible spiritual substance that radiated an intense hostility towards the Hertog Dominion!

If Ves donned this mask over his mind, he would probably turn into a rabid hater of the state!

"I'd fit right in with its rebels!"

Of course, he did not do anything of the sort. Instead, he hovered his altered spiritual projection close to Venerable Plinter's spiritual fragment.

As expected, the spiritual projection drew out a strong response!

Ves observed the spiritual fragment carefully. Some of the spiritual energy embedded with spiritual attributes that he couldn't identify started to get hopping mad! They tried to push towards his offending spiritual projection as if they wanted to beat it to death!

"So it works!"

In some cases, spiritual energy acted on their own in response to other entities. Ves took advantage of this by creating a specialized spiritual 'magnet' and dangling it close to Plinter's spiritual fragment.

His magnet's proximity to the fragment was enough to draw out elements that responded strongly to his new invention.

Ves keenly observed the reaction. Once he no longer perceived any movements, he formed a spiritual knife and began to cut into the fragment.

This time, he did not have to resort to drawing upon the power of his F-stone. The isolated spiritual fragment wasn't strong enough to resist his cutting strength.

Though Ves cut a bit more out of the fragment than he wanted, he managed to separate the spiritual energy that responded the strongest to his provocation.

Ves quickly grabbed hold of the separated portion before it could rejoin the fragment and dumped it in the imaginary realm.

The corrosive spiritual winds quickly ate at the separation portion while blowing it far away.

"Good riddance."

Ves employed his selective spiritual attraction technique again, this time choosing to focus on drawing out a different undesirable attribute.

The difficulty in employing this technique was that he had to guess the undesirable attribute in the fragment and form a strong, opposing spiritual mask to elicit a strong reaction.

Thinking all of this up required a lot of trial and error. Half of the time, his spiritual magnets failed to elicit a strong reaction from the fragment. He wasted a lot of time and spiritual energy to come up with the right guesses.

Nonetheless, slowly but surely, the spiritual fragment reduced in size. Ves continually cut undesirable portions from the fragment, all the while aware that his surgery was anything but precise. Each time he cut he also removed some of the more desirable parts of the fragment.

"It's a huge waste, but it's still worth it. I only need this fragment for its purity, not its strength."

At the end of the butchery session, Ves estimated he removed up to forty percent of the spiritual fragment's original makeup. The remainder consisted of spiritual energy that aligned strongly to duty, rifleman mechs and other desirable traits.

"I'm lucky that expert pilots are fairly focused."

Having removed most of the impurities of one spiritual fragment, Ves turned his attention to the other spiritual fragment.

He made his preparations before tentatively opening the B-stone lockbox. A feral spiritual fragment tried its best to escape, but Ves firmly clamped down with his own spirituality.

"C'mon! Stay still while I cut you down to size!"

Ves was much more reluctant to cut into Nyxie's spiritual fragment. It was much stronger and forced him to expend more spiritual energy to keep up his suppression. He continually topped himself up by drawing on the reserves of his spiritual energy battery while he quickly went to work.

He didn't have the luxury to be patient this time. He formed a crude spiritual mask, dumped a dollop of spiritual energy in them, then merged them with his spiritual projections.

Through some inferences, he formed magnets that drew out the worst attributed spiritual energy. Ves only made quick, crude separations, and was careful not to cut out too much.

The biggest problem he faced was that the powerful spiritual fragment was filled with undesirable spiritual attributes! If Ves wanted to get rid of them all, then the alien spiritual fragment would be reduced to the size of a pea by the time he was done!

"I can't be too strict this time. I just have to throw out the worst aspects."

He still cut out seventy percent of the spiritual fragment by the time he was done. Though the spiritual fragment weakened enormously due to his operation, Ves did not necessarily see that as a bad outcome.

"It was already very strong to begin with! Now that I've cut it down to size, it's a lot easier for me to control!"

Nyxie's spiritual fragment no longer possessed the strength to resist the P-stone's suction force. Ves confidently left the P-stone out of the B-stone lockbox as he was sure that its trapped spiritual fragment wouldn't be able to escape anytime soon.

Another benefit to lobotomizing the alien spiritual fragment was that it became a lot milder now. It no longer radiated as much alienness and hostility anymore. The fragment also lost most of its tyrannical and domineering attributes.

What remained was a spiritual fragment that appeared much more... agreeable.

"Inside every monster is a heart of innocence." Ves murmured as he studied his handiwork.

Though the spiritual fragment still retained much of its alienness and hostility, their weakening meant that other spiritual attributes could finally exert some of their influence.

What Ves discovered after his inspections was that Nyxie possessed traits that aligned closely to faith, devotion, responsibility and thoughtfulness.

Ves rubbed his chin in thought as he tried to make sense of what he perceived. "These are the traits of an elite groomed for senior priesthood or something."

He couldn't tell anything more. In any case, these attributes were a lot gentler and more positive than the poison that suffused the alien spiritual entity. While they didn't necessarily align with his vision for his Desolate Soldier design, they weren't entirely opposed.

"They'll form a nice bonus, I think."

Seeing how effectively he managed to purify his spiritual fragments made him wonder if he could employ the same techniques to living expert pilots. What if he wanted to 'reform' them or alter their inclinations?

He did not immediately discount the possibility.

Though Ves believed it was considerably more difficult to spiritually lobotomize living expert pilots, the same theories still applied. He just had to employ more strength to breach their defenses and keep his 'patients' under control.

Ever since he learned what he could do to mech pilots, he began to harbor ambitions to recruit and nurture expert pilots. This was one of the reasons why he hired mech pilots like the Ingvar twins on Bloodstone.

Raising them was not impossible. Keeping them was another matter.

Aside from keeping the Mech Corps and other greedy organizations from poaching them, Ves also had to make sure to keep them loyal to him.

Indoctrination could only do so much, especially to already-mature expert pilots.

In such cases, it might be useful for him to operate on their spiritualities to make them more pliable!

"I wonder if it works against someone who is a lot more intense like Venerable Foster."

She'd be a much more agreeable expert pilot if he removed her intense hatred towards pirates and her strong loyalty to the Hafner Duchy and the Vesia Kingdom.

Of course, Ves didn't think he could succeed. Not only was she growing stronger at a rapid pace due to her incredible talent, the aforementioned traits formed a core part of her spirituality!

"I don't think I'll have anything left of the Venerable by the time I'm done cutting into her mind!"

Chapter 1508 Ingredient Preparation

Ves took an extensive break and left his newly-lobotomized spiritual fragments alone. Only after he got rid of his fatigue did he return to his lab.

"How are you, my lovelies?" He idly asked as he caressed the two occupied P-stones.

Venerable Plinter's spiritual fragment resided peacefully within its P-stone. Since Ves removed most of its loyalties towards the Hertog Dominion and such, the spiritual fragment no longer belonged to a specific side. Aside from its desire to return to its source, the fragment didn't exhibit any bias.

"I hope you stay put and cooperate with me." He told the fragment. "If you work with me, I'll make sure you can strengthen your source."

Ves did not regret what he did to Venerable Plinter, but he wanted to make sure he made up for it. Giving her a new source of strength through her spiritual association with the design spirit of the desolate soldier would give her a bright future.

While Ves wasn't sure how much expert pilots benefited if he made use of their spiritual fragments in this fashion, at the very least his actions brought them a little closer to advancing to ace pilot.

As for Nyxie's spiritual fragment, Ves wasn't quite sure what to make of it. The good news was that Ves removed its most negative traits and emotions. The bad news was that its other traits rose to the surface and started to turn the spiritual fragment more sophisticated and thoughtful.

"Now that it isn't raging mindlessly at me, it's become a lot more self-aware!"

Though Nyxie's spiritual fragment had weakened, Ves actually started to fear it more. He didn't necessarily dislike locking horns against strong opinions. What he feared the most were opponents who outsmarted him! Mixing cleverness and madness together was a recipe for disaster!

Despite his fears, Ves put on a brave face and grinned towards Nyxie's spiritual fragment. "Enjoy your last moments in this state. Soon enough, you'll be reborn anew."

Perhaps sensing the nefarious thoughts that Ves had in store towards it, the spiritual fragment tried to fight against its bonds and attempted to escape.

It was no use. The spiritual fragment couldn't overcome the P-stone's attraction force no matter how much strength it mustered.

As for the third ingredient, Ves focused in his mind. He constructed several images and pumped them with a juicy amount of spiritual energy. He expended a considerable amount of excess spiritual energy to impart his images with enough strength to hold their ground against the stronger spiritual fragments.

Rather than construct a single, complex image, Ves instead formed half-a-dozen abstract images.

The images were meant to steer and supplement his upcoming actions. Each image revolved around a singular concept. The most important ones related to duty, ballistic rifleman mechs and an intense hostility towards the sandmen race.

Ves wasn't sure how useful it would be to throw these images into the mix. He believed it didn't hurt to try, especially since he had the spiritual energy to spare.

The Grand Dynamo opened up so many new options!

He grinned and turned towards Lucky. As ever, the cat curiously kept watch over Ves from a distance, as if he was afraid of getting caught in whatever disaster might ensue!

"Wish me luck!"

"Meow!"

Lucky scooted backwards until his body hid behind the bulk of a lab machine. Only his head peeked around the corner.

Ves didn't take his pet's lack of confidence to heart. He knew what he was doing this time!

Having created a spiritual product before, Ves invested a lot more in his preparations. Since he couldn't exert a lot of direct control over the spiritual

restoration process due to his ignorance of how he worked, he mainly focused on preparing his ingredients.

"Now, I have to combine them together."

Ves expected the output to conform closely to the ingredients he put into the transformation process. This was the best solution he could think of to influence the outcome of his second attempt to create a spiritual product.

"Here goes."

He breathed deeply and began to summon up his spiritual strength. After a few minutes of accumulation, he began to form a powerful spiritual projection in the shape of a hammer.

While Ves placed his F-stone nearby if he needed extra oomph, he believed his strength was already sufficient for what he was about to do to the spiritual fragments.

"Life must come from death!"

Ves slammed his spiritual hammer against Venerable Plinter's spiritual fragment. Already weakened and damaged from all of the cutting that Ves had done, it only took three powerful strikes to shatter the fragment into pieces!

Though the spiritual fragment had died, its pieces still lingered in the P-stone. Ves didn't have to worry about them drifting away, though the wounds he inflicted to them were severe. Even now, they slowly started to break down as if they couldn't maintain any coherence due to the death of its consciousness.

"I have to hurry with the next steps before the damage accumulates!"

He knew he was working on a time limit, so he quickly employed his spiritual hammer again. This time, he struck his own spiritually-empowered images. They folded easily because of their comparatively weaker strength.

Only after that did he turn his attention to his toughest target. Nyxie's spiritual fragment evidently noticed what Ves was doing and adopted a hardly, defensive posture.

Cracking this shell would probably take a lot more effort!

"Well, if I can't break you with one strike, I'll break you with two. If I can't break you with two, then I'll employ three strikes!"

Ves didn't think anymore and simply began to wail at Nyxie's lobotomized spiritual fragment with his spiritual hammer. He held nothing back and employed his hammer repetitively, wasting a lot of spiritual energy due to his exertions and the damage his hammer sustained.

This was fine, because he had plenty of spiritual energy in reserve to supplement his expenditure!

While he estimated that he would be able to shatter Nyxie's spiritual fragment easily if he drew upon the power of the F-stone, he did not wish to waste its power. With only 80 percent charge remaining, Ves had no idea if he could ever obtain a second F-stone with an offense-oriented charge.

Right now, it was a much better idea for Ves to be wasteful with his spiritual energy!

"C'mon! I can hit you all day! Just break already!"

A spiritual fragment taken from an entity that was as powerful as an ace pilot did not break very easily. Even if Ves had carved out a significant chunk already, what remained was still qualitatively stronger than anything he worked with before.

If Venerable Plinter's spiritual fragment was akin to wood, then Nyxie's spiritual fragment was akin to a steel!

Nonetheless, Ves employed sufficient force to deal at least some damage with every hit. No matter how small the damage, as long as Ves kept abusing it, the damage quickly started to accumulate!

After forty or so continuous hammer strikes, his target finally reached its limit. It could no longer hold itself together and died, shattering in brilliant pieces that resembled tiny spiritual daggers!

"Finally!"

Ves quickly moved on to the next steps. He first dissolved his spiritual hammer and recharged his spiritual energy from his spiritual energy battery.

Once he topped himself off, he cast a brief glance to his bodyguard.

"I've reached a very critical stage in my experiments. I can't afford any distractions. Is that clear?"

She nodded. "I will make sure you won't be disturbed."

While his lab was already locked down, who knew if Gavin or Crindon insisted on barging in for some reason. Ves absolutely couldn't afford to draw his concentration away from this step!

He briefly spent some time on centering himself before he concentrated his mind.

It was time to create his second spiritual product.

"Combine!"

He scooped up the broken shards and stuffed them all together in a single P-stone. This time, he didn't plan to use anyone's mind as his mech workshop. He didn't want his new spiritual product to exhibit too much bias towards a specific individual, except perhaps himself.

Since he didn't really know what he was doing right now, he just shuffled all of the shards and damaged pieces into his P-stone in order to spread them around. He had no idea how this effected the end result, but Ves did it anyway.

Once he thoroughly mixed up the spiritual shards, he stopped shuffling them around and began to infuse the collection with a large portion of his loose spiritual energy.

He expended more of his spiritual energy than before, but made sure to supply enough to bind all of the shards together and nothing more.

After he infused the collection with a sufficient amount of spiritual energy, he began to press and manipulate them together.

Different from his first attempt, the shattered pieces were much smaller and much more numerous.

Back when he created Vescas, he reformed it out of the dead remains of the Dragoncat's spirituality.

This time, he employed a spiritual hammer to deliberately create a lot of smaller shards. While this helped mixed up the ingredients more thoroughly, it also increased his workload as he had to spend a lot of time trying to piece them together.

Some shards merged with each other easily. Others needed the help of his spiritual energy in order to stay together.

Ves made sure to keep everything mixed up. He didn't want to reform Nyxie's spiritual fragment and Venerable Plinter's spiritual fragment, because that would defeat the purpose of his earlier actions.

He found that it was a bit hard to force many pieces that weren't related to each other together. Ves resorted to a judicious amount of spiritual energy in order to force the unions.

While the forced combinations didn't seem stable at first, Ves did not mind them too much. He kept puzzling more and more shards together until he gradually merged them into a greater and greater whole!

Each union formed different relationships with each other. Small two-way symbiotic relationships expanded to larger collections of shards that amplified each other's strengths.

Though the shards were already 'dead' and devoid of consciousness, the spiritual energy that Ves contributed to the spiritual restoration process infused the gathered shards with the spark of life.

After several long hours, the spiritual restoration process reached a critical point. The shards kept fusing and fusing together until Ves hardly noticed the separation between them. The spiritual attributes that were locked in the individual shards began to spread and mix until the distribution of traits became even throughout the newly-forming spiritual product.

Eventually, a small explosion set off as his spiritual product finally radiated life!

"I did it! I've created another life!"

He formed a completely new spiritual entity! As Ves inspected his handiwork, he smiled wider as he observed many improvements over his first attempt to create a spiritual product!

His second spiritual product had reached a higher level of quality! Ves already sensed that it was stronger, more coherent and far less riddled with flaws than Vescas!

"Success!"

Though his spiritual product still exhibited plenty of flaws compared to a natural spiritual entity, the important point was that its aura radiated all of the traits that Ves sought.

He closed his eyes and began to rely purely on his spiritual senses to identify the spiritual attributes. All of them conformed to his intentions! He was especially pleased to find out that his earlier preparations had borne fruit, as the most critical spiritual attributes happened to be the most prevalent!

Duty! Rifleman mechs! Faith! Responsibility! Hatred towards sandmen!

All of these traits and more mingled together in a spiritual product that fit closely to his vision of the Desolate Soldier! If not for its lingering flaws and 'impurities' in its spiritual attribute mix, Ves would have been able to make it into a perfect match!

Considering the mix of attributes he sensed from his newborn spiritual product, he decided to call it the Solemn Guardian.

"You're a bit mysterious, aren't you?" He smirked at his new creation. "That's fine. Life is too boring if everything goes according to plan!"

The slight alien attributes in the Solemn Guardian clashed with the human attributes that Ves made sure to include. The resulting interactions made him feel as if he dealt with a spiritual product that combined the best of both!

Chapter 1509 Spiritual Component Monopoly

The mix of traits in his second spiritual product gave Ves the impression of a solemn guardian. Even with an innocent mind that swelled with life, it already expressed a strong inclination to do its duty and fight the sandmen without asking too many questions.

Yet even if it was willing to do its duty, Ves somehow felt that it was always watching and thinking in silence. It was too intelligent to remain ignorant.

"Just like a Kinner."

He knew that the Solemn Guardian still had some growing to do. Its birth merely set the starting point for its personality and the traits. Ves needed to be very deliberate in raising his new spiritual product and make sure it expressed its spiritual attributes in the way he envisioned.

"It's like raising a child. If I raise it wrong and bring out the worst in it, I will have created a monster!"

Ves cradled the spiritual product with his Spirituality and brought it into his mind. He already partitioned a section that isolated the Solemn Guardian from the rest of his mind.

He did not wish to corrupt the Solemn Guardian with his own thoughts! He was anything but a good role model!

"Be a good kid while I indoctrinate you in your calling in life!"

Ves lacked a structural way of raising newborn spiritual products. The only means he could resort to was exposing them to himself or other hosts. He could also opt to keep them in his P-stone if he wanted them to remain innocent, but that was not a good choice when it came to design spirits reserved for mass market mechs.

For now, he decided to exert manual control over the Solemn Guardian's upbringing. He diverted a sliver of his mind to lecture endlessly about doing one's duty to the young and curious Solemn Guardian. With the strength of his mind, multitasking like this required very little effort.

"It's not a great solution, but it's better than nothing."

A personality could not be shaped by telling them what to do. Ves merely wanted to lay the groundwork and influence the Solemn Guardian's inclinations even further towards his desired outcome.

Ves expected it would only begin to mature and settle its personality when exposed to the minds of the first mech pilots of the Desolate Soldier model!

Ves already witnessed how swiftly Vescas grew when it continually connected to Lady Miralix when she piloted her Kinslayer. The direct and intimate connection between mech and mech pilot allowed Vescas to peer into the deepest parts of a human's mind.

Such a deep and honest exchange, unhindered by any barriers or miscommunication, was incredibly powerful to a naive and undeveloped spiritual product!

Of course, the same applied to him as well. If Ves did not partition off his mind by building an isolated cage with his spiritual energy, the Solemn Guardian would probably be contaminated by his impure thoughts!

"I'm not suitable at all." He sighed, and unconsciously glanced to Nitaa.

His dutiful bodyguard hadn't managed to observe his spiritual manipulation, but his physical interactions and his habit of talking to himself revealed plenty of hints.

Even though Ves appeared to be half-mad when he created his second spiritual product, Nitaa did not display any judgement. The means of the Holy Son were mysterious and unfathomable.

Hosting the Solemn Guardian in her mind would have been ideal.

Unfortunately, as someone with spiritual potential, Ves believed she wouldn't be capable of hosting a spiritually-strong entity like the Solemn Guardian.

"I'm not really sure what will happen."

Ves did not wish to break her mind by forcing the Solemn Guardian in her head. Despite their excellent match, the container was too weak!

The other Kinner on his staff, Crindon, did not possess spiritual potential. Hosting the Solemn Guardian in his mind probably wouldn't lead to any damage.

However, this was not a good option, as the mind of a spiritually-weak person existed in a slightly different phase. His mind would not be able to serve as an effective container because its boundaries were permeable!

He could only rely on himself for now. Perhaps in the future he might develop a better solution or rely on an expert pilot in his retinue to educate his spiritual products.

Ves smiled as he leaned back and considered his current situation. With the creation and birth of the Solemn Guardian, he secured the most essential component to his mech design.

He increasingly drifted away from centering his perspective on the X-Factor. The X-Factor was not an independent phenomenon, but represented an expression of the spiritual components of a mech.

The design spirit and the mech pilot of the mech both shaped the X-Factor, but the former posed a much greater influence. Unless a mech pilot became spiritually strong enough to match the strength of a design spirit, their influence would always be negligible on the aura of the mech.

Ves made a small realization all of a sudden.

"Expert mechs are probably the most similar to my mechs!"

When piloted by powerful expert pilots, the expert mechs which might not have possessed any X-Factor must have gained auras upon becoming active! It was just that without the corresponding support from the mech, the potential of these auras hadn't been reached.

"Still, it's enough to make expert mechs appear more impressive and intimidating in battle!"

This was likely one of the many reasons why the introduction of an expert mech onto a battlefield led to disproportional swings in morale. Allies became emboldened while enemies quaked in fear!

His hunger to design an expert mech only increased upon making this realization. If his standard mechs already projected a formidable aura, what if it overlapped and synergized with the force of will of an expert pilot?

Ves could scarcely estimate the degree of amplification that might occur!

He sighed. "There's no use pining for expert mechs right now. I still have a project to finish."

The Desolate Soldier design was not an impressive mech. Performance wise, it merely performed on par with the other mechs in its class and price range.

However, the reason why Ves possessed the confidence his mech design might do well was because of it came with a spiritual component!

Instilling his mech designs with design spirits was like adding an exclusive component to them. As long as Ves maintained a monopoly on adding spiritual components to mechs, no other mech designer could match his efforts!

It was as if every mech on the market consisted of landbound mechs. Every mech designer focused solely on optimizing mechs for combat on solid ground. As a newcomer in the market, Ves did not believe he could adequately compete against the market leaders with more than a century of experience.

However, it was a different case if he introduced a component that no one could replicate! If he was the only mech designer in the market to add a flight

system to his mechs, then his products immediately distinguished themselves! The flight capability that only his own mechs possessed made them stand out in the market because of the unique value they could provide to their customers!

This simplistic analogy described his current situation as a mech designer with a unique design philosophy. So long as his competitors remained in the dark, Ves effectively maintained a monopoly on spiritual components!

"Perhaps there might be some oddball mech designers out there who come close, but the galaxy is far too expansive. The chance of bumping into one is miniscule!"

Of course, the problem with maintaining a monopoly on something valuable was that it could easily engender greed. Ves did not completely rely on the rules set by the MTA to protect him once his value became more obvious.

"This is why forging ties and cultivating support is important."

He already planned to rely on two particular connections to cover him against most threats.

His relationship with Gloriana and by extension the Wodin Dynasty of the Hexadric Hegemony protected him against local threats.

As long as Ves and Gloriana remained an item, his local rivals and enemies were restricted from acting overtly!

The most his enemies could do was to act in secret and use dark mercenaries or other patsies to mess with him and damage his interests.

"As long as Gloriana remains protective of me, the local powers will not dare to provoke her ire!"

Though her protection was likely effective against weaker threats, she could not do a thing against greater threats. What if a Coalition partner or a

matriarchal dynasty became his enemy? Against threats that matched or surpassed the strength of the Wodin Dynasty, Ves could not completely lean on Gloriana to save his hide.

This was why Ves believed that he needed to cultivate his relationship with the Rim Guardians. While the mech pilot fraternity might not have much say within the MTA, its strength and influence in the galactic rim were undeniable!

The only problem was that gaining their favor required an immense amount of effort! The Rim Guardians were so large and powerful that a single mech designer barely registered in their sensors.

Even if Ves worked hard to earn their recognition and favor, he had no illusion that he would be regarded as an incidental friend by them. The relationship between them would always be transactional, which meant the only way to earn their protection was to pay them with something.

"That reminds me, I still have to help William Urbesh."

The Rim Guardians gave him three years to help him advance to expert candidate. With one year already gone by, the exiled clansman had made no progress at all under the tutelage of the Larkinsons!

From the occasional status reports he received from Melkor, he and the other Larkinsons on Cloudy Curtain did their best to kick him into shape. Yet no matter how much effort they put into retraining Urbesh, the damned coward never got rid of his fears when piloting a mech!

Fortunately, Ves had a much better idea on how to remedy Urbesh's situation now that he almost finished his tour. The lessons he learned, the techniques he invented and the insights he gained on spirituality gave him enough confidence to come up with a solution!

As long as he successfully elevated William Urbesh to expert candidate, he would become eligible to earn merits which he could exchange for a variety of goods and services from the Rim Guardians!

"As long as I can earn their backing, I can deter many threats, especially in relation to my business activities!"

Ves did not expect the Rim Guardians to pay too much attention to his personal safety. That was where Gloriana came in. What Ves valued most out of the fraternity was their willingness to act as a guarantor to his business interests.

As an arm of the MTA, earning their protection also entailed earning the MTA's approval. At the very least, no matter how controversial his products became or how much other mech designers coveted his monopoly, they had to go through the Rim Guardians first if they wanted to attack his business interests!

In more ideal circumstances, Ves vastly preferred to rely on his own strength. Yet that wasn't possible now, so the only way he could tide himself over until he grew strong enough to stand on his own was to lean on others.

"I'll be meeting Gloriana soon." He recalled. "I should make sure to impress her when we meet. I can't afford to lose her protection at this stage!"

Though Ves harbored ulterior motives, he truly wanted to see whether they could form a genuine relationship with each other.

It would be best for the both of them if their love coincided with their interests. He was willing to stomach Gloriana's many eccentricities to see if they were compatible.

If there was one benefit to entering into a relationship with someone crazy, it was that Ves could easily pretend to be crazy as well!

"This is my third form of protection!"

Who would ever covet the design philosophy of a nutjob? Just like he did at Centerpoint, Ves planned to cultivate an eccentric or even crazy persona to confuse everyone who wanted to learn his secrets!

So long as he could rely on these three pillars for support, Ves became a lot more confident he could maintain his spiritual component monopoly!

Chapter 1510 Business Projec

Now that he gained his spiritual component, Ves threw himself back into his design work with gusto. The formation of the Solemn Guardian gave him a much more solid direction on where to take his mech design.

Ves quickly whipped up the primary armament of the Desolate Soldier within days. In fact, it only took less than a day to design the basic framework of his ballistic rifle!

Just as with the mech frame, Ves aimed for simplicity in designing the weapon. Leaning heavily on his newly-acquired Ballistic Weapon Optimization IV Sub-Skill, he aimed to bring out the most of each subcomponent while keeping down the cost and complexity of the weapon.

His new depth of knowledge in ballistic weapons already allowed him to develop a rifle that matched comparable ballistic rifle models in the market!

Though his work did not necessarily surpass the quality of weapon models designed by dedicated weapon developers, the difference was that his rifle design completely aligned with the Desolate Soldier's mech frame!

The mass, dimensions, balance, targeting mechanisms and other aspects of the rifle conformed extremely well with the rest of his design. This improved and optimized the handling of the weapon to an amazing degree, beyond what he could achieve with an off-the-shelf rifle design!

"Of course, the biggest benefit to designing my own rifle is that I don't have to pay any licensing fees."

This not only saved him several hundred million credits in upfront licensing cost, but also reduced the production cost of his Desolate Soldier as he didn't have to pay any per-unit licensing fees per mech!

With the estimated product margin of his Desolate Soldier model already so low, a minor saving like this could make a huge difference if his product took off in the market!

Cutting cost, minimizing waste and making the most efficient use out of a limited amount of materials dominated his current design project. Ves truly felt a lot of pain when he thought about all the compromises he made.

He had to give up a lot of flashy options in favor of cheaper and more sober solutions. Ves wasn't used to designing such a limited mech at first. He was used to incorporating expensive toys and premium materials in his mech designs, confident that his ample budget could accommodate his profligate design choices!

The Aurora Titan which sold for at least 100 million bright credits for the cheapest edition was an especially egregious example of his feature-based design approach!

Now that he suddenly switched to a cost-based design approach, Ves navigated his design project from a completely different direction. While he encountered plenty of minor bumps along the way, now that he reached this point, he fully became used to prioritizing cost over features!

"The Desolate Soldier will not be the last cheap mech I'll design. In fact, it is a preview of what is to come!"

Once he completed the rifle design, the Desolate Soldier design became feature complete.

Ves did not rest on his laurels yet, though. He still had to subject his design through many simulated tests in order to refine it further.

His new Simulations IV Sub-Skill became very handy at this instance. Ves exchanged it from the System with the hopes of increasing his productivity during the refinement phase of his design project.

The results surpassed his expectations!

Though Ves hadn't learned any specialized mathematical models, his ability to comprehend their strengths and limitations had improved. He knew how to tweak them to get more useful data out of his simulations and he also became more proficient in combining them to perform more realistic tests.

Ves gained more out of a single simulation run than ten separate tests in the past!

In addition, if his mech incorporated the design philosophies of other mech designers, then he became a lot more capable in compensating for their abstruse effects. He gained a lot of confidence in the reliability of his virtual tests. His reliance on testing physical prototypes had lessened!

At the very least, Ves didn't expect to gain too much out of putting a prototype of the Desolate Soldier. The lack of complexity that underpinned its design meant that there were much less variables in play.

Nonetheless, any mech designer who believed his mech design was bad because it didn't resort to fancy materials or components was wrong!

During his design project, Ves fully immersed himself in the art of doing less with more.

The solutions he developed or derived from his knowledge base combined into a sublime mech design. The results of the simulations he performed all conformed to his expectations.

Even so, Ves did not believe that he was ready to publish his design.

"I haven't tested a single prototype yet!"

Ves did not wish to act with too much haste and prematurely publish a design without being completely sure it performed just as well in reality. No matter how much his simulation abilities had improved, not a single model was perfect! Discrepancies were bound to emerge!

This put Ves into a somewhat difficult situation. He was still a distance away from the Bright Republic. He couldn't supervise the fabrication and the testing of the prototype in person.

"I can only rely on my subordinates to perform their duty in my absence!"

Ves realized that this was a test for the LMC! As long as they could conduct the testing and production of his Desolate Soldier without issue, his company was robust enough to survive without requiring his direct physical presence.

He decided to call Calsie directly. As soon as the call came through, his comm projected her face.

"Ves." She nodded calmly. She looked a bit more mature now that she held her leadership position for a time. "I did not expect you to contact me directly. Usually you are content with letting Gavin speak on your behalf."

"This is an exception. You're aware of my current design project, right?"

She nodded. As the caretaker of the LMC, she already heard about his Desolate Soldier project. "Of course. How much progress have you made?"

"I've completed the first iteration of its design."

That shocked her. "This fast?!"

"I told you I prioritized speed this time. Don't worry about its quality. It's a simple design so I managed to devote a lot of attention to each and every

aspect. I'm very confident that my Desolate Soldier can compete fairly in the mech market at its current state."

"Have you tested it yet with a prototype?"

"No. That's why I'm calling you. I'd like to delegate the testing process to you and Ketis. I'll transfer an encrypted data package that contains the design schematics and all of the necessary documents to fabricate the prototype. Can I trust in you and Ketis to perform the testing on my behalf?"

She nodded seriously. "I'll make sure that the details of your design won't leak. People will only know that we are in the process of testing a new mech. By the way, this is a good opportunity to put our new space-based testing ground to use."

After Ves designed the Aurora Titan, the LMC needed to form a testing ground in space in order to test the mechs in-house. The new testing ground was situated in the middle of an asteroid belt in the outer portion of the Cloudy Curtain System.

"Make sure that everything is secure. Don't hesitate to draw deeply upon the Avatars of Mechs to secure the testing areas. I don't want a single snapshot of my mech to circulate on the galactic net."

If his competitors gained a good idea on what he was working on, they might attempt to steal his thunder!

Once he made all of the arrangements with Calsie, he ended the call. He then packaged all of his design schematics and other relevant files before passing them onto Crindon.

"Make sure to encrypt and transmit it securely to the LMC." He commanded.

After packing Crindon off, Ves finally enjoyed some free time to himself. While he could always spend his time on further testing and optimization work, he wanted to wait until the test results of the prototype came back.

"Well, Lucky." He turned to his cat, who looked up at him in curiosity. "Don't you think you owe me something?"

"Meow?"

Ves stretched out his hand. "Don't think I forgot about the P-stone I gifted to you!"

"Meow meow!"

"I don't care if you can gain more benefits if you digest the P-stone more fully! I'm not feeding you for free!"

"Meow!!!"

"What kind of a gem cat are you if you don't produce any gems?!"

After Ves kept pressing his cat to cough up the goods, Lucky finally couldn't take it any longer and floated into the bathroom.

Half an hour later, the cat grumpily phased through the hatch with a shiny object resting in his paws.

"Meow."

A reflective white gem landed on his desk. Ves smiled and reached out to scratch Lucky's head. "It's about time."

"Meow!"

Lucky fussily darted out of reach and dove onto his bed before burying himself under the covers.

Ves paid no mind to the antics of his cat and studied his long-awaited new gem with his System vision.

[Accumulation of Spirit]

Allows a mech to bear a small quantity of spiritual energy.

He frowned at the description. Not only was it disgustingly vague and imprecise, its actual utility was unknown!

"What difference can this gem even make?"

The gem appeared distinctly underwhelming compared to the other gems that Lucky produced lately. While the Ardent Wish and the Sin of Altruism directly improved the aspects of a mech by twenty and forty percent respectively, all the Accumulation of Spirit did was to make the mech be capable of bearing a 'small quantity' of spiritual energy!

"LUCKY!"

"Meow!"

Lucky instantly turned intangible and phased through the bed and deck. His eagerness to flee proved that his cat had definitely taken liberties with the P-stone!

"Goddammit!"

Ves sighed. It was his fault for getting too caught up in his design work. He should have paid more attention to Lucky and forced him to produce a proper high-quality gem!

He reached into his pocket and retrieved a pouch. The Accumulation of Spirit joined the other valuable gems he held.

Even if the Accumulation of Spirit appeared weak, Ves still believed it was significant enough to help him form another masterwork mech.

"Every gem represents another potential masterwork mech!"

Ves wasn't sure how much he'd be able to improve his mech affinity if he crafted a second masterwork mech, but any boost was welcome. He already reaped a lot of benefits from his first masterwork mech.

He did not have much hopes of replicating his feat immediately. While he invested a lot of effort into the Desolate Soldier, he hadn't been able to replicate the same degree of fervor when he worked on the Devil Tiger design.

He did not lack for passion when he worked on his current design project. However, his mentality was different.

The Devil Tiger was one of the purest expressions of his creativity, unbound by existing rules or taboos.

The Desolate Soldier on the other hand was a product made for the market. Ves had to work around so many limitations in order to conform to market demand.

"There's a huge difference between passion projects and business projects."

The former satisfied his creative desires while the latter advanced his business interests. His actual tastes diverged from the current iteration of the Desolate Soldier.

If he followed his whims more closely, then the mech design would have probably looked substantially different!

He sighed. "I can't expect to ignore the demands of the market and sell lots of mechs. For mass market mechs, conforming to the tastes of my customers is even more essential!"

This was his first time he tried to compete for market share in a high-volume product category, and he did not wish to impose too many weird ideas in his upcoming product.

"Even if my work isn't completely satisfying to me, selling lots of mechs brings its own form of satisfaction!"

As long as he sold a lot of mechs and earned a lot of money, he gained the capital to fund other passion projects!