

Mech 2141

Chapter 2141: Spiritual Construct

One of the inadequacies that Ves had recently recognized was his overreliance on his design spirits.

No matter how you looked at it, relying on design spirits to enhance the overall value and capabilities of his mech designs was much like hiring outside consultants to perform your own work.

There was always a price to relying on others.

Though Ves did not intend to stop his use of design spirits to empower his mechs, he gradually realized that it shouldn't be his only method.

He could do more with his design philosophy.

For a rather long period of time, Ves faintly felt as if he hit a bottleneck. At his current level, there wasn't much more he could do to strengthen his mech designs.

Even the exceptional creation of the Superior Mother had only been possible by relying on another external aid. Once his high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum ran out, what could he do? It was too difficult to develop an advanced form of spiritual life by relying solely on his own spiritual energy at this point!

Ves recognized that he had to address this inadequacy sooner or later.

If his own skills couldn't keep up with the development of his design spirits, eventually both would stagnate.

He always felt as if he should do something more with the spiritual foundation of his mechs. To that end, he began to study the building blocks he had already laid.

Even though his design still needed a day to reach completion, its spiritual foundation already looked respectable and solid. While it wasn't a completely accurate description, the spiritual foundation appeared as a solid platform where it could safely stow any design spirit of his choosing.

Of course, a rushed mech design was not as spiritually solid as Ves liked. There was no helping it as the act of designing mech was like showering it with love and life.

The more time he spent on nurturing a mech design, the stronger its spiritual foundation!

In the past, the spiritual foundation served as a platform for his images. Weaker and much less livelier than his design spirits, his living images had been borne completely from his mind.

This effectively made them his own strength and an extension of his own will. Though it sounded simple to create them, Ves had to pour in an unimaginable amount of concentration in order to keep everything straight.

Of course, with the growth of his Spirituality Attribute, it became easier to create an image.

Yet no matter how many of them he made, they all started without that much life. It took a considerable amount of spiritual feedback from mech pilots to transition them into greater lifeforms, but even then they possessed too many holes to count.

Creating life was not that simple. There was a very big reason why Ves chased after multiple ingredients that came from other lifeforms.

It was much easier for Ves to rearrange life than create it from scratch!

However... now that he thought about it, creating a fully-fledged spiritual lifeform without relying on spiritual fragments sounded like a very useful ability to have.

This might even be the key to advancing to Senior or Master!

"I'm too far away from that, though." He muttered dejectedly.

Yet as he studied the spiritual foundation of his competition mech, Ves began to develop the notion that even if he couldn't create new life, what about stuff that wasn't alive?

It wasn't as if he attempted it before. Inspired by spiritual engineering, he had already attempted to form constructs with his spiritual energy. From spiritual hammers to spiritual knives, these lifeless constructs acted as his tools whenever he wanted to accomplish something.

"It's just that they disappear when I lose my concentration."

His spiritual projections had to be actively maintained. Once he relaxed, his spiritual projections broke down into a disorganized collection of spiritual energy.

Would the same happen with the spiritual foundation of a mech?

"Not necessarily, but..."

He hadn't paid enough attention to the spiritual foundation of his mechs. He treated it as a bed for his design spirits, nothing more. Yet now that he looked at it, they seem remarkably bland and boring to his eyes.

Compared to real spiritual engineering, the spiritual foundations of his mechs were no better than empty ground!

Certainly, by themselves, the spiritual foundation laid the groundwork for the X-Factor of a mech. However, they were so simple and uniform that Ves began to think he had been wasting its potential for a very long time.

It was like he was staring at an empty plot of land. There was nothing on the plot except for grass and soil. This was hardly a nice place for his design spirit to live in. Being forced to sleep out in the cold and lacking too many amenities meant that his design philosophies needed to do all of the heavy lifting.

What if Ves tilted the balance back to the spiritual foundation of his mechs?

Making it stronger by injecting more thoughts and energy into it only resulted in a more solid plot of land. No matter how high the quality reached, it was still a barren site!

What Ves truly needed to do in his opinion was to develop the land. He had to bring in some materials or take it from the existing plot of land in order to build something.

At the very least, a simple bench or a tent could do wonders in diversifying the spiritual foundation!

Of course, all of the talk about plots of lands and building tents was nothing more than an analogy that helped him put the problem in perspective.

The main point was to see if he could transform the spiritual foundation into something more interesting.

He began to reach out his arm in order to visualize what he was about to do. He wanted to manipulate the spiritual foundation.

He started off with something simple. He took a piece of the foundation and molded it into a suppressor.

He wanted to suppress the Superior Mother's tendency to look down on boys. While Ves had no doubt that Joshua was flexible enough to adjust to any design spirit, it would still make life easier for him if the Superior Mother didn't treat him like a baby!

Though he wasn't exactly sure how to make a suppressor, he let instinct and prior experience guide his efforts. Eventually, he felt as if he accomplished something.

The moment he completed his endeavor, the spiritual foundation of his mech suddenly became remarkably less hostile towards boys!

Ves widened his eyes.

This was an exceptional result, yet it took relatively little effort to achieve! Usually, he had to create entire new mech designs or blend several fragments and motes together in order to achieve a change.

Yet now, he just managed to accomplish something profound by actively developing the foundation!

However, the biggest test was yet to come. When Ves drew back, he didn't even have to lift his concentration to see that the construct fell apart.

It was as if he dug up some soil and created a sandcastle, only for the wind to scatter it into pieces!

"Damnit!"

The spiritual foundation turned back to normal once this occurred. The changes he made were temporary. For some reason, his efforts didn't stick!

Though this problem plagued him longer, this time he felt he should be able to do something.

He had tried this before with his own spiritual energy, but that was different from the spiritual foundation.

He began to experiment further, forgetting that he was wasting precious minutes that he could have used to flesh out the technical mech design further.

He became so enthralled by the idea that he was convinced he could accomplish something!

"Maybe I need to change my approach."

What was a spiritual foundation? It was the imaginary bedrock of a design. It spiritually embodied his vision for his mech design.

The more he designed his mechs with focus, the more he shaped and grew its spiritual foundation.

This was why even if he didn't instill his mech designs with any design spirits, they still exhibited some X-Factor!

Ves recalled the time where he had reached a bottleneck in the X-Factor. Instead of developing the spiritual foundation further, he entered a crooked path and resorted to borrowing power from design spirits instead.

While he didn't regret his choice, he knew that he could have eventually achieved some results if he kept on developing his original path.

"Well, I think I'm getting closer."

He had to go over all of his theories and assumptions on the spiritual foundation.

Eventually, he came up with a hypothesis.

If he wanted a construct to stick, then it had to match the character and attributes of the spiritual foundation.

Once Ves developed this theory, he twisted his fingers and began to shape a different construct.

He knew what he did wrong previously. By suppressing an existing attribute or introducing a new aspect, he deviated from the original framework of his vision.

If he wanted to make something stick, he had to create something that the spiritual foundation actually supported!

"Right now, the strongest trait of this mech design is superiority!"

Superiority was the central theme of his striker mech design and his best hope of defeating Jovy's inscrutable specialty.

So how could he make it stronger?

Ves stumbled upon an idea. He molded a portion of the spiritual foundation and turned it into a facsimile of the statue of the Superior Mother.

Even though it wasn't a complete match of the real statue, the likeness was close enough for his purposes.

He didn't settle for this. He applied another idea as well, one that sounded very counter-intuitive.

Ves began to concentrate even more and began to apply his special trick to separate certain spiritual attributes.

Right now, he wanted to draw out every attribute related to superiority and stuff it into the 'statue'.

Under normal conditions, it was very hard to keep spiritual attributes isolated. They had a tendency to diffuse like gas in the air.

When Ves attempted to corral all of the superiority attributes in a random location, they faintly repelled each other as if they all shared the same charge.

Yet once he put them into the spiritual statue, it was as if they encountered the opposite charge.

"They're sticking in place!"

The moment the superiority-attributed spiritual energy entered the statue, it began to stick to its shape, causing the entire construct to become more spiritually active and powerful!

When Ves tentatively drew back, the construct remained erect.

It was as if the plot of land suddenly hosted the statue of the Superior Mother. Though the spiritual foundation no longer radiated as much superiority, the strength and concentration exuded by the statue more than made up for it! It was as if concentrating spiritual energy that shared the same attributes resulted in some kind of magnification!

His eyes grew as wide as saucers. This odd change had not only altered and strengthened the spiritual foundation of his mech design, but also seemed to support its own existence!

It had become a permanent spiritual construct!

Even after Ves completely withdrew for a time before coming back, the construct showed no sign of dissipating or breaking apart!

This was a fundamental breakthrough, and perhaps one of the biggest since he chanced upon the idea of utilizing design spirits!

Now, even when he wasn't making any use of living spiritual entities, his mech design already exhibited more spiritual potency than usual!

Compared to the stakes of this design duel, this singular innovation was the real prize!

"Hahahahahahaha!" Ves broke out into laughter. "This is it! This is the key! This is the way to go forward!"

As Ves completely lost his composure, the two women floating far above his head looked at him with surprise.

"Your partner appears to be very.. enthusiastic." Master Willix remarked.

Gloriana smiled lovingly at her boyfriend. "He managed to achieve another breakthrough. His mech will definitely become stronger!"

Chapter 2142 Between Heaven and Hell

The design phase finally came to an end.

For three straight days, Ves and Jovy both stayed awake and spent all of their time on designing their mechs. Even when they ate or visited the bathroom, their minds were still preoccupied with designing their respective competition mechs.

There simply wasn't enough time to fit in everything they sought in a proper mech!

Despite their formidable design ability that allowed both of them to stand on top of other Journeymen in their generation, the quality of their mechs did not even come close to their proper mech designs.

They didn't need to be. A design duel was a contest of judgement, skill and speed. All of these aspects were critical to the success of a mech designer, whether they founded a business, worked for another company or served at a government institution.

If a mech designer couldn't design anything decent in three days, then how would their products amount to anything in three months? The competition would always be able to offer something better in the same amount of time!

Only a couple of exceptions deviated from this pattern. Gloriana for example physically abhorred rushed mech designs. She only participated in design duels and competitions if she had to, and most of the time her performance wasn't very stellar.

Ves took a very brief nap before he spent two days on fabricating his striker mech at a very rapid pace.

In contrast, Jovy simply uploaded his design schematics to the materializer aboard the Ubiquitous Force before pressing a single button.

Though the frigate's materializer couldn't compare to industrial fabricator, a third-class mech made predominantly with simple materials only took less than half an hour to finish!

Even Ves felt envious when he heard how quickly Jovy created his mech! Of course, to him, nothing beat the act of building up a mech step by step.

When Ves met with his girlfriend at a closed arena set aside for the duel, she offered him a strained smile.

"Your design choices are very... interesting." She began. "You sure like to play with fire, do you?"

He shrugged. "Striker mechs don't offer much room for versatility, and with such a low budget I had to make some very hard choices. Piling up on armor is prohibitively expensive, so I focused on offense and a little mobility instead."

As a result, he came up with a fairly mobile striker mech, though calling it mobile was stretching it. While it was capable of outmaneuvering other defensive mechs, his machine could forget about outracing a light mech!

The two chit chatted a bit before Jovy arrived at the balcony overlooking the dueling arena. The MTA mech designer seemed no worse for wear, as his many augmentations allowed him to forgo sleep for several days with ease as well.

Ves nodded towards Jovy in respect. "How was your experience designing a third-class mech?"

"It has been very... illuminating." The young man grimaced. "Third-class mechs are so limiting, and the mech type and budget that you have set doesn't help matters either. I enjoyed the novelty, though. At the start, I thought the design process would be child's play, but pretty soon I discovered there is a surprising amount of depth despite the lack of options at my disposal."

"When it comes to lesser mechs, you don't have as much choice, but each of them becomes a lot more meaningful."

"Well said, Mr. Larkinson! You can't imagine the sheer variety of weapon systems, defense systems, mobility systems and utility systems that mech designers can fit in first-class multipurpose mech designs. We approach limitations in an entirely different way because there is always a solution to a problem. The central question we have to grapple with is choosing which solutions to include in our mech frame. For example, the lack of capacity in third-class mechs can easily be solved by adding dimensional storage modules."

Something like dimensional storage modules that effectively added pocket spaces to mechs were completely unthinkable to third-class mech designers!

Such an expensive piece of high technology not only required a lot of expensive exotics, but also a very extensive understanding of multiple physics-related fields.

"The strengths and weaknesses of third-class mechs are almost always set in stone." Gloriana commented. "Shoring up their weaknesses isn't as worthwhile as enhancing their strengths. The customers in third-rate states already take these weaknesses into account by adjusting their tactics and mech rosters accordingly."

"It's certainly different from what I am used to back at the MTA. There, every mech can fulfill several roles at a time. They're not called multipurpose for nothing."

The transition from narrow roles to omniversal configurations still proceeded to this day. The Big Two and the first-rate superstates pioneered this development, and over the next couple of centuries, the second-rate states would slowly follow suit.

As for the third-rate states, Ves wasn't sure if he could even witness their transition to multipurpose mechs in his lifetime. The impoverished states simply had too little access to the fancy tech and materials required to fit so many features in a single mech frame.

Soon enough, Master Willix and a few members of her entourage arrived from behind.

"Master Willix." Everyone greeted and bowed.

She smiled. "Gentlemen. I hope you have put your full effort into designing your respective dueling mechs. Mr. Larkinson, I see you have enjoyed yourself during the process. Will we be witness to something remarkable in the upcoming match?"

"I hope so. I came up with some new tricks and decided to try them out on the spot."

"There is not much assurance in that answer."

"Even I don't know how my latest tricks will perform." He shrugged.

The Master turned to Jovy. "As for you, Mr. Armalon, it is clear that your familiarity with third-class mechs is quite shallow. Do you have any intentions of designing more third-class after this experience?"

This was a difficult question to answer for Jovy. He didn't dare to lie to an eminent Master.

"While I wish to broaden my horizons, I can't lose sight of who I am and what I would like to pursue. Just like third-class mechs, it is better to deepen my strengths than to compensate for my weaknesses. Perhaps later when I have made more accomplishments in my primary fields will I have the time to address the limitations I've experienced in the last few days."

"Your development is completely in your hands. We at the MTA do not force Journeymen like you down a proscribed path. We merely point out the different ways you can arrive at your destination and let you decide from there. Let me just tell you that being in a hurry is not always beneficial to your chances of advancing to Master."

"I understand what you are conveying, but I respectfully disagree, Master."

It took a lot of courage to stand up to a Master, but when it came to their own progression, mech designers such as Jovy had already made up their minds!

Master Willix merely nodded in acknowledgement before turning to one of her subordinates. "Please inform the champions to enter the arena."

Everyone at the balcony watched as the striker mechs designed by Ves and Jovy finally entered the arena grounds.

Both mechs gleamed in the light as their bare metal surfaces lacked any adornments. Even coating the mech was a waste of time, especially when the enemy mech would certainly be able to ruin it all within minutes with their wide area weapons.

Due to its advantage in mobility, the mech designed by Ves reached its assigned spot first.

The mech had become a bit leaner than Ves initially sketched. While it still looked fat and heavy compared to an average mech, it was clear to everyone that his striker mech unavoidably sacrificed protection.

"What's its name?"

"The Purgatory Envoy." Ves answered.

Master Willix raised an eyebrow at that. "In some legacy religions, purgatory is a state of afterlife that sits between heaven and hell."

"Isn't that where people go who aren't evil enough to go to hell, but don't quite qualify to go to heaven?"

"Correct, Miss Wodin. It is in perjury where this group of deceased are gradually purged of their sins. Once their souls are purified, they are ready to pass through the gates of heaven."

On the surface, the mech appeared as if it was the one doing the purging rather than being subjected by it. With its thick arms that was largely made up of embedded flamethrowers, the Purgatory Envoy looked more than ready to purify anything in its way with cleansing flames!

Jovy's mech took its place as well. When Ves studied what his opponent had designed, he reacted with surprise.

Of all of the possible configurations he could have chosen, Jovy opted for a mech that was similar to the Purgatory Envoy!

The large, flamethrower-wielding mech was capable of dishing out plenty of heat while resisting it in turn.

Different from the Purgatory Envoy, Jovy's mech obviously sacrificed firepower and mobility for defense.

The mech itself was substantially more massive. Due to budget constraints, Jovy opted to clad his mech with very thick armor plating. All of this mass not only granted his machine a high heat capacity, but also offered decent protection against physical damage.

The mech's mobility did not appear to be very great, but Ves noticed that Jovy had implemented a very unusual-looking pair of legs. Alongside this change, the mech's lower torso was almost completely circular, and Ves noticed something peculiar about the skirt of armor placed around the lower belly.

Underneath this loose skirt was a partition that allowed the mech to rotate its upper body!

"The torso can spin 360 degrees!" Ves gasped.

This meant that even if the mech wasn't able to traverse distance quickly, it could nonetheless keep rotating its upper body so that its front always faced a mech that tried to circle around its flanks!

This change partially countered the increased mobility that Ves imparted to the Purgatory Envoy.

He had actually hoped that Jovy would design a relatively immobile mech. If that was the case, then Joshua could circle his Purgatory Envoy around the enemy mech and savage the more vulnerable rear with flames!

Now, it became clear that this wasn't possible when both mechs were in peak condition.

Jovy looked proud at what he managed to accomplish. "I had a hunch you would come up with a mech like the Purgatory Envoy. While I could have designed a mech that expressly countered yours, I wanted a challenge, not a beatdown. I designed the Fortunate Devil in order to beat you fair and square!"

What Jovy claimed was that he did not wish to exploit the advantage of natural counters. If he truly knew that Ves would design a flamethrower-wielding heat-resistant mech, then the MTA mech designer could have paired his mech with a shotgun instead!

"Are your hunches that strong?" Ves narrowed his eyes at Jovy.

"If my hunch is wrong, then so be it. I can't be right all the time."

After a final check, both mechs were cleared for battle. Everyone fell silent as the Purgatory Envoy and the Fortunate Devil faced each other.

Within the cockpit, Joshua Larkinson had initially been a little nervous, but became increasingly more excited.

"What an amazing glow!" He gasped. "So this is what the patriarch has achieved with his ritual!"

The Superior Mother's glow immediately meshed with the young mech pilot. Though it took some time for Joshua to tune his mindset, his research on Hexers along with the advice provided by Ves allowed him to find the best way to immerse himself in his mech.

"I am the son, and the mech is my mother! Together, we will cleanse this devil of its sins!"

To Ves, the glow of the Purgatory Envoy had gradually grown stronger. Though Ves did not add a third eye to the mech, he would have imagined it glowing like a beacon as Joshua became increasingly more intertwined with the Superior Mother!

"Commence the duel!" Master Willix finally announced!

The fighting phase began explosively! Both mechs approached each other while already firing their flames at full blast!

The Purgatory Envoy's flamethrower spewed torrents of blue, while the Fortunate Devil responded with flames of red!

Chapter 2143 Cheating Reality

A fiery clash commenced!

Despite their similarities, the Purgatory Envoy and the Fortunate Devil both adopted different concepts!

The striker mech designed by Ves already turned into an aggressive machine in the hands of Joshua. Due to its lack of armor, the Purgatory Envoy needed to take the initiative in order to create its own advantages.

Standing in place and forcing the duel to devolve into a battle of attrition would definitely play in the hands of Joshua's opponent!

In contrast, the Fortunate Devil could afford to be patient. While its mobility was garbage and its flamethrower was a little weak, the mech was clad with armor from top to bottom!

As Ves studied Jovy's handiwork, he recognized that his competitor was a very tough nut to crack. Though the rear armor of the Fortunate Devil was not very impressive, as long as its rotating torso could keep up with the circling attempted by Joshua, it was impossible to exploit its main weakness!

"What a very tough mech!" Ves commented.

"Outlasting an opponent is also a way to win." Jovy confidently responded. "To be honest, I had a lot of difficulty adjusting to the limited capacity of my mech. I figured the only way to get some space was to make everything bigger."

The Fortunate Devil was taller and thicker than the Purgatory Envoy. Already, its substantial mass showcased its advantages by resisting and spreading all of the heat inflicted by its opponents throughout the rest of its frame!

"What a powerful heat-conducting armor system!" Ves gasped.

The cheap armor plating that Jovy piled up on his mech was not exceptionally resistant against heat. Its heat capacity did not stand out either.

Jovy only focused on adding one considerable advantage to his mech. It was difficult to cripple the Fortunate Devil!

This indirectly countered the main attack mode of the Purgatory Envoy. Joshua gritted his teeth as he maneuvered his mech around its larger opponent. Flames spewed from the integrated flamethrowers. Twin bursts of concentrated blue flames spat out from the arms and tried to sear through the armor of a leg.

Unfortunately, the fairly directional streams of fire failed to melt the armor section!

Though the section heated up considerably, already the hot armor plating rapidly transferred the thermal energy to the adjacent plates of armor. In turn, those armor plating passed on the heat to its neighbors, thereby dispersing the heat throughout the entire flame, causing its exterior to slowly heat up as a whole!

"Tch." Joshua spat in frustration. "This is taking too long!"

Though the Fortunate Devil wasn't able to bring its flamethrower to bear on the moving Purgatory Envoy all the time, once it did, Joshua always chose to retreat.

While the mech designed by Ves was capable of withstanding some heat, Joshua needed to ration the defenses of his mech as much as possible!

Already, he could tell that this duel was going to take some time to resolve!

The Purgatory Envoy couldn't chew through the armor of its opponent fast enough, while the Fortunate Devil's offensive option was rather weak!

For some time, the match seemed to devolve in a steady and boring pattern.

Unlike the flashy moves and quick maneuvering of normal mech duels, a battle between two fire-spewing striker mechs had automatically turned into a test of patience!

Despite the lack of action, everyone spectating the duel worked with mechs for a living. No one looked down on the low-specced mechs because they were both rather good for mechs designed in a matter of days.

It was because their designs had been rushed that they recognized Ves and Jovy's competence. Other Journeymen at their ages would have never been able to deliver something at this quality level within the same span of time!

Aside from the technical details that could be gleaned from the competition mechs, the observers also carefully looked for something exceptional.

Everyone knew that the dueling mech designers possessed remarkable specialties.

The one developed by Ves was already rather clear on the surface. Despite rushing its design, the Purgatory Envoy exuded a glow that wasn't much weaker than that of the Little Angel!

Though the MTA delegation didn't really know what that meant, both Ves and Gloriana knew that this was a considerable improvement from the past!

If Ves could already impart a glow that was this strong in a mech designed in a couple of days, then what if he applied his innovations to a proper mech design?

Gloriana turned to her boyfriend. "Is this the result of your breakthrough?"

He grinned. "That, and more. You'll see, hopefully. I already instructed Joshua on what to do. If the Purgatory Envoy works the way I think it does, it will likely be able to deliver a very nasty surprise to the Fortunate Devil!"

That would take some time, though. Right now, the two mechs were just trying to wear each other down. It was too difficult for either striker mech to exploit any advantages when they were both in good condition.

The Purgatory Envoy's glow didn't provide any solutions to this problem. Aside from making Joshua a lot more in tune with his mech, the MTA mech pilot didn't even show any signs of flagging despite the fact that he was within close range.

As for the Fortunate Devil, the heavily-armored machine performed steadily and held all of its care close to its chest.

Ves finally couldn't contain his curiosity any longer.

"Mr. Armalon, Master Willix provided me with a brief excerpt of your record. It stated that your specialty is probability manipulation. I have spent a lot of time on figuring out how that actually applies to your mechs. Can you elaborate?"

"Why certainly." Jovy openly replied. "Let's start with what my design philosophy is actually based upon. Normally, if an object bumps into a hill, it has to climb over it in order to get past this obstacle. At the micro level, this doesn't always take place. Instead of bouncing back or expending energy to ascend the hill, there is a small but realistic chance of tunneling straight through the hill."

This phenomenon was known as quantum tunneling, and played a huge role in lots of human tech. Anything that took place at the scale of atoms could be explained with the help of quantum mechanics.

Whenever something included the word quantum, then uncertainty always followed. There was no way to determine the momentum of a moving particle at the same time as figuring out its coordinates.

This involved some very complicated concepts, but to put the long story short, reality constantly rolled an endless amount of very tiny dice in order to run itself!

"What does quantum tunneling have to do with your specialty, exactly?" Ves asked.

He had some suspicions, but he wasn't certain about any of his guesses.

Jovy seemed to know that. This wasn't the first time he dealt with confusion. He waved his hand towards the arena.

By now, the two mechs had made some progress.

The Purgatory Envoy constantly tried to exploit a weak point, but failed in all of its attempts. Eventually, Joshua decided that rather than waste time trying to outflank his opponent, he would rather focus on applying all of the damage on a single section that didn't rotate as fast as the torso.

The legs!

With its integrated flamethrowers spewing focused gouts of hot blue flames, the Purgatory Envoy pointed them downwards and began the very slow process of melting through the armor that protected the legs!

As much as the amazing heat transfer effect of the Fortunate Devil's armor system transferred all of the thermal energy elsewhere, it did not happen at once.

Joshua knew enough about striker mechs and mechs in general that he just had to transfer enough heat on the same spot to overload this defensive measure!

The mech pilot of the Fortunate Devil knew he was in a bit more danger than before. Part of the reason was because the legs and especially the feet were not ideal locations to transfer away the heat.

If the Purgatory Envoy pointed its integrated flamethrowers at the chest plating of the mech, then the heat applied to this location could easily be dispersed to the arms, head, lower torso, rear armor and legs!

Yet by only heating up the bottom parts of the Fortunate Devil, the rate of heat transfer had dropped by at least a half. This was because the heat couldn't be transferred further downwards. The floor of the arena was not as good as conducting heat as the Fortunate Devil's specialized armor composition!

However, even as the Fortunate Devil's unwieldy but very well protected flamethrower only managed to land an intermittent amount of red-hot flame onto the Purgatory Envoy, its mech pilot kept his cool and did not change his methods.

It was... as if the MTA mech pilot was waiting for something.

"Quantum tunneling is something that is solely associated with electrons, photons and other subatomic particles." Jovy calmly continued even as his mech gradually fell into a leeway. "What if it's possible to achieve it on a larger scale? What if you could make a mech physically tunnel through a solid wall as if it didn't exist? What if the mech could fire a round at a battleship that tunneled straight through the hull plating in order to damage the vulnerable interior?"

Didn't this sound like what Lucky was doing on a daily basis?

Ves frowned. "In order to achieve that, trillions of dice rolls have to land on the right number. The probability of something like that happening is so tiny that the galaxy will probably end before something like that happens."

"Ah, but a mech designer can dream, right?" Jovy said. "This dream is the start of my ambition. All of those dice you mentioned are perfect and proper. However, one day, I had a thought. What if you could replace those proper dice with loaded dice?"

"..What?"

That was some statement! Replacing the dice that reality rolled with your own loaded dice was a very daring way to distort outcomes. It was such a radical and absurd statement that Ves would have never been able to come up with it himself!

The twinkle in Jovy's eyes made it clear that he was expressing his true passion.

"When you flip a coin, there is a fifty percent chance of landing heads or tails. However, if you can access this coin and alter it so that the side that represents heads is heavier than the other, then you will have effectively increased the odds of landing heads!"

This was just cheating reality! Ves was truly impressed with Jovy's guts. Not every mech designer possessed the courage to break reality's rules to this extent!

"This is just a single instance at the micro level, though." Ves pointed out. "I admit that achieving this change on a single subatomic particle is already impressive, but that hardly allows an entire mech that consists of an unimaginable sum of atoms to tunnel through a solid wall."

"It's a work in progress." Jovy replied. "You see, once you get the hang of the trick, you can easily apply it again. Once you are able to automate this process to an extent, you can quickly scale up this effect on a substantially larger scale! Watch!"

The MTA mech designer waved down to the arena grounds, causing everyone to pay close attention to the two flame-bathing mechs.

Just as the Purgatory Envoy was making good progress in melting the Fortunate Devil's legs, its left arm suddenly sputtered. The constant release of fiery blue flames had abruptly dropped by half.

Its integrated flamethrower had malfunctioned!

Ves immediately straightened his back. "That's impossible!"

He knew his mech design the best. Though the Fortunate Devil's flamethrower had inflicted plenty of damage on the left arm, Ves deliberately made it resilient to heat.

Considering its surface damage, the left arm still had a long way to go before its internals started to reach a critical heat state.

"This is the result of my design philosophy!" Jovy proudly declared. "As long as there is an infinitesimally small chance of malfunction, it can be amplified!"

What a horrible effect! Probability manipulation turned out to have a lot more punch than Ves expected!

Chapter 2144 A Cleansing

As Joshua hastily adjusted the Purgatory Envoy's movements in response to its malfunctioning left flamethrower, he momentarily lost his composure.

While he wasn't a mech designer, he still knew a thing or two about the physical properties of mechs.

According to the internal diagnostics of his mech, its flamethrower had been quite far from reaching a critical damage state.

Mechs were complex machines. Millions of parts had to work in unison to keep it running.

Even for a brand-new mech that had recently rolled off the production line and passed MTA certification, there was still a chance for one of its parts to malfunction!

The best the mech company could do was to make as little mistakes as possible during the fabrication process. Yet even if the LMC invested ten times as much in quality control, the odds of delivering a bad mech could never be ruled out.

This was simply how machines worked. Total reliability was an unattainable goal!

However, these days, as long as the mech company did not cut any corners, the mechs it delivered rarely exhibited any defects out of the blue. It would take months for their owners to notice any signs, and by far the majority of the faults they encountered usually resulted from battle damage!

"Is this what the patriarch has warned me about?" Joshua guessed.

He didn't know what probability manipulation meant, but this inexplicable malfunction definitely had something to do with it! As he regained his composure and continued to immerse himself in his mech, he tried to explore what went wrong.

What had the Fortunate Devil done to his mech?

Why had one of the Purgatory Envoy critical components malfunctioned when it wasn't even close to sustain damage?

If his left flamethrower hadn't incorporated some redundancy, it would have been knocked out entirely, thereby reducing Joshua's offensive options even further!

"Fortunate Devil indeed. You're probably made to spread bad luck!" He cursed as he tried to dance his mech around the red-hot flames.

Before, he had been fairly confident in his chances of winning. As long as his mech retained enough functionality, he could steadily melt down the Fortunate Devil's legs.

However, now that the Purgatory Envoy's damage output dropped by 25 percent, Joshua needed to spend much more time to force his enemy into a critical state.

That extra time gave the enemy plenty of time to turn the tables!

On the balcony, Ves frowned deeper while he tried to figure out what exactly took place. How was it possible for the Fortunate Devil to induce an inexplicable malfunction on his mech?

"I'm a bit surprised, though." Jovy remarked.

"Why?"

"Your mech is actually holding out longer than I thought. According to my estimates, your Purgatory Envoy should have suffered numerous faults by now. How is your mech able to hold out so well? Is your glow that powerful?"

Before this match, Ves didn't know how Jovy's design philosophy actually worked, so he applied a bunch of possible countermeasures to his mech design.

One of them was adding a superiority-oriented glow to the mech.

Ves believed that this glow was partially responsible for weakening the Fortunate Devil's mysterious effects!

Even so, the mech designed by Jovy had plenty of time. With its thick armor and resilient legs, the Fortunate Devil kept getting hotter, but to little consequence!

Devils were made to bask in flames!

Another minute passed as both mechs tried their best to beat each other down. Ves noted that the Fortunate Devil specifically focused on applying its flames on the right flamethrower of the Purgatory Envoy.

Jovy's mech had partially crippled one weapon. As long as it could cripple the other one, then the outcome was pretty much set in stone!

"Another malfunction has occurred!" Gloriana shrieked!

One of the joints of the left leg of the Purgatory Devil slowed down. It wasn't facilitating movements as smoothly as before!

As a consequence, the striker mech designed by Ves abruptly exhibited an awkward gait. It was as if it had suddenly sprained one of its ankles.

Though Joshua was skilled enough to adjust to the sudden handicap, his confusion grew deeper.

Aside from getting hit by a few spluttering red flames, the legs of his mech had hardly sustained any damage.

He suddenly shook his head. "Damn it, this is bad! I'm letting the enemy dictate my rhythm!"

This was a rookie mistake that he hadn't made in a while. Various reasons caused his usual form to worsen.

Fighting an MTA mech pilot in a mech designed by an MTA mech designer was incredibly intimidating.

The Fortunate Devil's effects were too mysterious and confounding for him to understand.

Joshua feared another malfunction would take place at any moment. If the part that malfunctioned was critical enough and if the timing was very bad, the match could be decided right then and there!

"The patriarch is counting on me! I can't lose!" He reminded himself.

Though Ves did not tell Joshua what was at stake, his pride and reputation was still at stake!

The setbacks and confusion had slowly caused him to grow more out of sync with his mech.

The Superior Mother never faltered!

The Superior Mother never lost confidence!

The Superior Mother never let down her son!

This was his first time piloting a mech with a Hexer glow. Even though Joshua had displayed a remarkable capacity to adjust to any glow, he often had to figure out every new instance, especially if they weren't meant with someone like him in mind.

After all, he was not a Hexer himself, so he was still figuring out the glow as he battled his opponent.

Now that he recognized that he needed to adjust his state, he ignored the strange malfunctions as much as possible and continued to merge his mood with the superiority wafting from his mech.

Joshua recalled one of the instructions that Ves had passed on to him. There might be a way to turn the tables against the Fortunate Devil!

However, in order to do so, he needed to regain his cool and continue to grow closer to his mech. As his immersion grew deeper and deeper, the glow of the mech grew even stronger.

As Ves watched the changes from above, he knew that Joshua had finally deepened his bond with the Superior Mother.

The pair needed to reach a certain degree of intimacy in order to access one of the experimental new functions that Ves had added to the Purgatory Envoy!

He chuckled. "You're not the only mech designer to add a nasty trick to your mech design, Mr. Armalon. Do you know why I bestowed the name of Purgatory Envoy to my mech?"

Jovy tilted his head. "Is it because your mech comes armed with powerful flamethrowers?"

"Heh. It's more than that! See for yourself!"

As the battle continued to tilt against the Purgatory Envoy, Joshua had finally immersed himself deep enough to find the functions that Ves had hidden into the mech!

"There's two of them.. which one is the right one... ah, I'm pretty sure that this one is what I need!"

The two mechs continued to rain flames onto each other. The MTA mech pilot exhibited a great amount of patience. With its awful mobility, there was no point in moving around or performing any superfluous actions.

As long as he fought steadily, the mech itself would inflict all of the critical damage. He had been waiting for the Purgatory Envoy to exhibit a third malfunction. It was only a matter of time before it happened, and the Fortunate Devil had plenty of time at its disposal.

The Purgatory Envoy shrieked.

It had finally happened again! This time, the malfunction was a bit more serious than the previous ones. The striker mech's engines exhibited a tiny problem that nonetheless resulted in a rather noticeable drop in motion.

It was as if the mech designed by Ves had suddenly grown tired and old all of a sudden! The speed of the mech dropped again, causing the Fortunate Son to land a lot more flames onto its target.

This was bad!

Yet just as the Fortunate Son celebrated this stroke of luck, Joshua had finally figured out how to activate one of his mech's added features.

"PURGE!"

The Purgatory Envoy's frame suddenly released a powerful pulse that washed over Ves, Gloriana, Jovy, Master Willix and the rest!

"What is that?!"

"I feel as if an energy field had just passed through my body!"

A drastic change took place once the Purgatory Envoy had pulsed its glow.

The mech's left flamethrower suddenly increased its damage output.

The engine no longer exhibited any problems, causing the locomotion of the mech to grow steadier again.

The only malfunction that the Purgatory Envoy had failed to restore was the damage to one of the joints of the legs. The damage wasn't something that could be restored unless a mech technician performed repairs on the joint in question.

With the mech partially restored, Joshua became more energetic than ever! The restoration of the left flamethrower immediately boosted his confidence as he continued to apply more heat to the enemy mech's legs.

"Hah! I purged all of the filth clinging onto my mech. What will you be able to do now?!"

At this point in time, much of the leg armor of the Fortunate Devil had been melted to the point of losing its integrity. Already, some of its internal components began to reach critical heat levels.

Just one leg had to be damaged to the point of losing functionality. As long as that occurred, the Fortunate Devil could no longer keep up with the Purgatory Envoy's circling.

Let alone protecting its vulnerable rear, Jovy's mech wouldn't be able to point its flamethrower at its adversary!

"This isn't all. There's more!" Ves whispered with anticipation.

Half a minute later, Joshua finally gained a handle on the second function.

"PURIFY!"

This time, the Purgatory Envoy did not pulse its glow. Instead, the glow began to concentrate a bit inside the integrated flamethrowers.

Though the blue flames didn't change, once they landed on the Fortunate Devil, the mech suddenly attempted to step backwards before halting.

For a moment, the MTA mech pilot wanted to escape the flames!

A strange pressure acted on his head. It was as if someone set a part of his mind on fire. It took much of his will and concentration to suppress the pain and fortify his mind using some of the methods taught by the MTA.

It took a lot more pressure to unbalance an MTA-trained mech pilot!

The purifying flames seemed to have failed in achieving its primary objective, but Ves guessed that it wasn't so simple.

As the battle continued to drag on, the Fortunate Devil finally showed signs of locking in place. While Jovy had applied a lot of armor to the legs, perhaps anticipating this attack, there was only so much the legs could be protected.

What discomfited him even further was that the Purgatory Envoy not only shook off some of its bad luck, but also suffered no further performance drops.

"This is strange.. my Fortunate Devil shouldn't be so unreliable." Jovy muttered.

Only Ves could explain why Jovy's mech wasn't as effective as before. The purifying flames released by his Purgatory Envoy were doing their best to wash away the sins of the Fortunate Devil!

This was one of the latest innovations he came up with! Now that he was able to shape some of the spiritual foundation of his mech design into a spiritual construct, he developed several different spiritual objects on the fly.

The first construct channeled the superiority aspect of the Superior Mother. Ves wanted it to function as a passive shield that did its best to keep them in its best state possible.

The second construct integrated something else. After exerting a lot of creativity, Ves believed he figured out the mechanism behind adding an active ability to the mech design.

Unlike the special features or abilities that were essentially controlled by design spirits, this new mechanism was fully grasped by the mech pilot as long as his bond with his mech was deep enough!

This was what Ves called a triggered ability!

Joshua only needed to think or say the right trigger word in order to activate the ability that Ves had tied to one of the spiritual constructs!

Being able to invest and affix triggered abilities to his mech designs was a drastic change from before. For the first time, his mechs were able to express all kinds of specific effects without relying on any design spirit.

In fact, these triggered abilities would probably work in a mech devoid of a design spirit!

Just as Ves thought that his new innovations clinched this duel, the Purgatory Envoy unexpectedly slowed down.

"What the hell happened?!"

"It's losing its power!"

"Nooo!"

The mech designed by Ves had done an admirable job at defending against the unknown effects propagated by the Fortunate Devil.

However, just because the Purgatory Envoy managed to suppress these effects did not mean it had become impervious to them.

All this time, the Fortunate Devil continued its attempt to spread bad luck to its opponent.

Finally, a critical component of the power reactor had inexplicably malfunctioned.

This wasn't supposed to happen. This key component was extremely well-protected and thoroughly checked by Ves. Even if it failed, the power reactor still possessed some redundancy that would allow it to retain full or partial power.

For some reason or another, none of those redundancies had kicked in! Due to the failing of several critical systems, the entire striker mech lost its steam!

"Victory has been decided. Mr. Jovy Armalon has won this design duel." Master Willix calmly announced.

Both Ves and Gloriana looked devastated at the frozen striker mech. Joshua lost!

"This is impossible!" Ves uttered in disbelief!

Chapter 2145 Tricked

A loss!

The design duel between Ves and Jovy ended up in the latter's favor.

The arena had become awash with flames. Burning propellant consisting of different components had been spread around the floor. A mixture of blue and red flames emanated from them as they constantly heated up the surroundings.

It seemed as if most of the arena had turned into a very special sort of hell.

In the center of this slice of hell stood two distinct striker mechs.

The Fortunate Devil seemed at home in this fiery environment. Despite sustaining serious damage to its legs, the resilient armor plating that Jovy Armalon had clad them with had done their job. The sheer amount of heat they withstood or transferred elsewhere had allowed them to resist several times more heat damage than they could have in isolation.

Ves had no choice but to give a lot of respect to Jovy. In his vast collection of knowledge, the MTA mech designer possessed an even greater understanding of heat-resistant materials! He utilized this strength to good effect in designing a mech that quite frankly managed heat a lot better than his opponent.

As for the loser, the Purgatory Envoy appeared intact but nonetheless inert. Its armor, though substantially thinner than that of the Fortunate Devil, bore a lot of scorch marks and melted traces. Though Ves designed its two arm flamethrowers with additional protection in mind, both of their exterior casings almost looked done for already.

Yet Ves and everyone else in the arena who understood mechs knew that the lighter and more mobile striker mech still had some fight left. If not for the unfortunate stroke of misfortune that just so happened to disable the power reactor, the mech could have still fought on for a time!

Due to the relatively low budget for the mech design, Ves had neglected to take this possible attack into account. When he initially allocated the budget, he spent most of it on the flamethrowers, the mech engine and the armor system.

The quality of the power reactor was very mediocre because he didn't have enough money left to invest in a better model.

A striker mech did not demand that much power anyway. Unless it had a flight system, all the power reactor did was run various electrical systems such as sensors and more importantly power the mech engine and every other locomotion system.

While that already demanded a lot of power, the power reactor could still keep up with existing demand. It would have been another story if Ves mounted energy weapons such as laser rifles onto his mech!

Ves never expected the relatively well-protected power reactor to become the main reason for his loss today. Through some unknown means, the Fortunate Devil deactivated at least three of four critical components and subsystems that were designed to prevent the power reactor from failing!

The odds of all of those elements failing in succession when the Purgatory Envoy was 1 in a million, and that was a rather generous assessment considering the overall damage the mech had accumulated.

Yet the Fortunate Devil managed to win the lottery, as improbable as the odds appeared. Despite the Superior Mother's protection and the fairly robust design of the Purgatory Envoy, Joshua had failed to resist the outbreak of bad luck.

"It is a pity." Ves sighed and shook his head. "I was so close to winning. Joshua was so close to winning."

Whether Joshua deserved to win this match did not matter. A design duel was supposed to test the mech designer, not the mech pilot.

The mech designer developed the mech and chose the mech pilot. Good judgement was one of the critical elements to be tested so the mech pilot was usually regarded as an extension of the mech designer for the purposes of a design duel.

Even so, Joshua must be feeling crushed to have his victory snatched away from him. If he knew that the Fortunate Devil possessed such an inexplicable attack method, perhaps he would have intensified his attacks and overloaded the Purgatory Envoy's flamethrowers to breaking point!

All of that was moot, though. The match had ended as soon as one of the two competition mechs lost the ability to fight.

"This is a fine mech duel." Master Willix remarked with a hint of satisfaction. "Mr. Larkinson, Mr. Armalon, congratulations to you both for designing two different but very capable mechs. I have thoroughly enjoyed the sight of seeing your mechs demonstrate their unique prowess."

"Thank you, Master."

She turned to Jovy. "Your Fortunate Devil managed to win the duel for you, but only barely. Compared to your previous duels, your victories were much more crushing. Do you understand the reason for this difference?"

"The Purgatory Envoy resisted my specialty." He said with a serious expression. "My Fortunate Devil had difficulty affecting the probabilities of its opponent. I can see that Mr. Larkinson's glow has a lot to do with that. It's not often that I see a Class IX design philosophy being able to resist my work. Usually, it's the Class III design philosophies that frustrate my probability manipulation."

So there was a way to resist Jovy's strange specialty after all! Class III design philosophies focused on defense, and Ves could see how they could spiritually defend a mech against intangible attacks.

Ves began to suspect that he had made a judgement error! He had become too charmed by his latest design spirit to make a better choice.

He should have chosen Qilanxo instead of the Superior Mother! While Ves wasn't sure whether the sacred god was capable of resisting Jovy's specialty, she probably had a much better chance of doing so than a more all-round spiritual entity.

Master Willix turned to Ves. "Do not take your loss to heart. Your mech has fought hard and showcased much of your potential. Jovy's specialty seems powerful, but it is still subject to chance. If this duel had been fought at any other time or location, your Purgatory Envoy's power reactor might not have failed so suddenly."

"I am happy with the lessons that I have learned from this design duel." Ves graciously replied. "Mr. Armalon has stimulated me a lot with his challenge, causing me to reach further than I have gone before. Compared to my latest gains, losing this duel is immaterial."

His sober answer gratified both Jovy and Master Willix. Both of them had witnessed moments where a mech designer refused to acknowledge a loss.

No matter how the opponent achieved his win, once one mech had been downed, the mech that remained standing was declared the victor!

Jovy especially went through many moments where his opponent refused to acknowledge the loss.

It was one thing to lose a design duel because the other mech and mech pilot performed better.

It was another thing to lose a design duel because a mech the mech designer poured his heart and soul into had suffered an extremely low-probability malfunction!

The sheer frustration that Jovy's unusual method of winning generated had actually been enough to bestow him with a notorious nickname!

"Mr. Armalon is known as the Reality Trickster within the local branches of the MTA." Master Willix told Ves. "Unless you can design a mech that can quickly crush his work or resist his probability manipulation, more often than not the outbreak of bad luck will slowly deliver him victory."

The Reality Trickster!

Any mech designer who acquired a nickname was exceptional in some way.

Ves felt a little jealous that Jovy gained a nickname that reflected his professional ability.

Whereas Ves got stuck with a nickname that painted him as a deceptive manipulator of people, Jovy got to parade around with a nickname that made him sound like a god who tricked reality on a daily basis!

Society was so unfair!

He coughed and briefly shook his head. He calmly approached Jovy and stretched his arm.

Both Journeymen cordially shook each other's hands.

"Congratulations on your victory."

"It was a hard battle. You didn't make it easy for me, Mr. Larkinson."

Smiles began to appear on their faces. Neither of them were dissatisfied with the outcome.

Jovy managed to score a victory against the youngest masterwork mech designer of the star cluster. This was a considerable boost to his prestige. Even though his opponent was just an indigenous mech designer, Ves had already accumulated a considerable amount of fame and reputation!

As for Ves, he rediscovered the vigor of duels and competitions. After a long time of eschewing design duels in order to focus on his business ventures, he realized that he had been missing out a bit. It turned out that a duel with high stakes applied enough pressure for him to squeeze more potential out of his design philosophy.

If he didn't desperately want to keep the Darkbreak module, he might have never been able to make his latest breakthrough so soon!

As Ves, Jovy, Gloriana and Master Willix discussed the design of the two mechs and the progression of the duel, down in the arena, the flames slowly started to die down.

Inside the cockpit of the mech designed by Ves, Joshua had entered his own form of purgatory.

He had lost.

The mere thought of it left a foul taste in his mouth.

Certainly, he engaged in many virtual mech duels. Usually, the expert candidates such as Jannzi and Tusa often trounced him flat, but that was normal as their piloting skills and battle instincts had already exceeded mortal limits.

Yet against any regular mech pilot, more often than not Joshua handily achieved a victory. His win rate when piloting any LMC mech was particularly stellar, as no one was able to understand the patriarch's work as much as he did. Years spent on obsessing over LMC mechs had given him an insurmountable amount of confidence when piloting these blessed machines.

That made this loss all the more painful.

Unlike his practice sessions, there was a lot at stake for this duel.

Aside from the rewards that Ves had mentioned, Joshua also fought for pride and glory. His own reputation notwithstanding, he knew that the patriarch himself had a lot riding on this duel.

It was not every day that a local mech designer received a challenge from a great MTA mech designer!

Any mecher was regarded as an elite in human civilization. They ranked above regular galactic citizens and represented the best of humanity.

If Joshua's benefactor managed to win this design duel, then this would make Ves, the Larkinson Clan and the LMC even more prominent! The gains of such an explosive victory would have boosted every clansman's fortunes further as a consequence.

Therefore, this design duel was far more than a private match between two Journeymen. Joshua could have benefited the patriarch and the rest of the clan immensely if he vanquished over his opponent, let alone boosting his own glory to new heights for being one of the few locals to defeat an MTA-trained mech pilot in a fair duel!

Yet.. he lost. Decisively so.

Though the main systems of the Purgatory Envoy had lost power, enough of the cockpit and auxiliary systems remained online to tell him that there was no way to continue the match.

The power reactor failed. It did not suffer from a temporary glitch where all it took was rebooting it or banging it a few times to get it back to work. A critical component had failed and multiple redundancies failed to kick in.

The Purgatory Envoy was for all intents and purposes dead.

A very sour and indignant feeling swelled up in his mind. His mech had succumbed before Joshua did. It failed to no fault of its own. Neither Ves nor Joshua had shown any neglect that could have led to such an unanticipated shutdown.

Despite doing their best, the two ultimately failed to gain an advantage in this duel!

"I lost.." Joshua almost sobbed as he looked down his hands.

"I lost.." He repeated.

"I lost.." The cockpit fell silent.

Chapter 2146 Trigger

Though the duel had ended and the Fortunate Devil already started to turn around to wade out of the flames, the arena still remained hot.

If not for the various protective measures provided by the MTA, the observers wouldn't have been able to observe the clash between two striker mechs in peace. All of the smoke and heat would have forced them to leave the dueling arena just a few minutes after the fight commenced!

The air filtration systems and other measures were doing their best to calm the raging fires and remove all of the dangerous elements from the arena grounds. It would take some time for the grounds to become safe enough to allow for the entry of mech technicians who were tasked with rescuing Joshua from his unmoving machine.

Ordinarily, the mech pilot of a disabled mech should calmly wait for the mech technicians to safely pull him out of his cockpit.

If the mech was at risk of threatening the life of the mech pilot, then it was advisable to eject the cockpit.

If that was not possible, then there were other, riskier means of evacuating from a dangerous mech.

However, these measures weren't necessary at the moment. The Purgatory Envoy was not at risk of exploding or threatening the life of the mech pilot. It was for all intents and purposes unmoving as if it had been frozen in time.

At this time, almost everyone in the arena believed that Ves had lost the design duel.

He already accepted the outcome declared by Master Willix and already started to cast his thoughts to the future.

The design duel had ended, but many other matters required his attention. Ves was already thinking about exploring the potential of spiritual constructs, researching the mechanics behind triggered abilities and preparing for his upcoming jaunt to the Nyxian Gap.

Yet even as the mech designer of the Purgatory Envoy had already written off the mech, the mech pilot who was trapped in the cockpit still thought differently!

"I haven't lost.."

"I haven't lost.."

"I haven't lost.."

At some point in time, Joshua's mindset changed. He refused to accept his loss.

His victory had been robbed from his hands.

The match was rigged.

How could he have known that the mech of his opponent was such a massive cheater?

Instead of beating his Purgatory Envoy fair and square, the Fortunate Devil instead relied on its formidable defensive capabilities and simply played the waiting game!

Despite being piloted by an incredibly elite MTA mech pilot, the Fortunate Devil hardly showcased anything exceptional.

It made Joshua feel as if his effort had been for nothing. It was as if he poured his entire heart into the fight, only for the enemy mech to remain on the same spot and simply rely on its armor to win over time.

While such an approach was a valid method of winning a battle, it was a dishonorable tactic!

Many more mech pilots than Joshua would feel indignant in this situation, but the huge amount of opportunities he missed made his loss even worse.

Joshua was not resigned to his loss!

He began to draw himself inward and tried to immerse his mind in the bond he shared with his mech.

Even though the mech had almost entirely shut down, the cockpit contained its own power supply, though it was barely enough to do anything.

In his bond, Joshua felt as if his thoughts went nowhere. The cockpit was like the brain of a paralyzed human. Even if the mind was sound, the body had turned into an abyss!

This gave him the illusion that he had ended in a pit of darkness.

This was true purgatory.

There was nothing around him. He could shout, scream or plead all he wanted, but the mech that was supposed to be beyond had fallen silent.

Yet Joshua knew that an LMC mech was not like an average mech.

Unlike mechs designed by other mech designers, every mech designed by the clan patriarch possessed a bit of vitality.

Living Mechs, Partners for Life.

The motto of the LMC had been carved into Joshua's heart. He understood deeper than any other mech pilot he knew that every mech was truly alive.

Right now, he did not believe the Purgatory Envoy had died.

Its power reactor may have failed, but the fault did not lie in the mech!

The mech was still alive!

The Superior Mother would not succumb so easily!

Joshua began to reach out to his own mech. He surrendered his entire being in order to convince that it was still alive!

"I haven't lost!"

"I haven't lost!

"WE haven't lost!"

"WE can still fight!"

"WAKE UP!"

"WAKE UP!"

"WAKE UP!"

"HELP ME, MOTHER!"

Deep within the mech, in some other realm, the spiritual entity known as the Superior Mother sensed the pleas.

Though she was still dormant and in the process of undergoing large and profound changes, something within the recently-born ancestral spirit stirred.

Like a mother reaching out to her son, the Superior Mother became more active, if just a bit. A tiny amount of energy channeled from the spiritual entity and entered the mech.

Something profound took place.

A trigger had been pulled.

A stronger bond began to form between Joshua, the Superior Mother and the Purgatory Envoy.

Just as the group on the balcony were starting to leave, Master Willix stopped floating towards the exit and frowned.

She turned around and stared back at the arena. Her sudden behavior caused the rest to halt as well.

"What is the matter?"

"I'm not sure."

Even Ves began to look down at his own mech. Now that he was paying attention to it, he began to frown as well.

There was something strange taking place.

Inside the cockpit, Joshua paid no attention to the behavior of the people outside.

In his mind, he only had thoughts for his mech and the Superior Mother!

"We can still fight!"

"We can still bring glory to the Larkinson Clan!"

"We can still help the clan patriarch become stronger!"

"Let us fight for victory! Let us fight for Ves!"

The moment Joshua uttered the name of the clan patriarch, the resonance that had emerged between himself and the Superior Mother had peaked!

"Purgatory Envoy, there is still a lot of fight left in you. Come back to life and take back the victory that belongs to us! Do not let your birth be in vain!"

The disabled striker mech began to show activity.

Its power reactor, which should have stopped working, started to rouse!

If anyone looked inside of its internal structure, then they would have noticed that some of its subcomponents started to glow.

The malfunctioning part that had been the primary cause for shutting down the mech attracted most of the glow!

The resonance that had emerged began to work on the component, physically affecting it until the part inexplicably became whole again!

This was impossible! Parts that weren't designed with self-repair capabilities in mind did not just spontaneously put itself back together.

Yet this impossibility had become possible with the emergence of the strange form of resonance that Joshua had summoned.

Right now, his mind and will grew unprecedentedly strong and active. His willpower, which had always been strong, somehow broke a barrier.

Joshua's spiritual potential, which had always rested in his mind without showing much sign of activity, suddenly started to merge with his willpower.

The young adopted Larkinson mech pilot began to form a nascent force of will!

As the power reactor gradually fixed itself, its systems started to kick back into gear. The power reactor thrummed before beginning to supply some power to the rest of the mech.

The Purgatory Envoy was coming back to life!

The darkness and desolation of its near-dead state had not caused the mech to remain in purgatory.

Instead, with the help of Joshua's extraordinarily strong willpower, he managed to will his mech to claw its way out of the darkness and embrace the light that was life!

At this instance, Joshua obtained the answers to all of the doubts and questions that had plagued him for some time.

He found his reason to pilot a mech.

"I am fighting for life."

Life was precious. Life was wonderful. Life was his source of strength!

For a single instance, Joshua embodied life, and resonated with the life instilled within the Purgatory Envoy and the Superior Mother!

All three elements shared a common strength, and the alignment of all three resulted in a miracle that astounded the mech designers on the balcony.

The Purgatory Envoy started to exhibit a flickering glow despite not containing any parts that could evoke such an effect. Jovy and Gloriana couldn't help but drop their jaws!

"This.. this is forced resonance!" The MTA mech designer uttered in shock! "I've never witnessed this with my eyes, but the signs are unmistakable!"

Gloriana whipped out a multiscanner and pointed it at the increasingly more active Purgatory Envoy. "The resonance sensor is detecting signs of activity. The mech is outputting 0.05 laverses and growing. Joshua is breaking through!"

Though Jovy and Gloriana both reacted with shock, it was Ves who truly felt astonished.

This was because he felt something very familiar from the resonance outputted by Joshua and the mech he designed.

That resonance bore the flavor of life!

His eyes widened as he realized the implications. If his guess was correct, then Joshua's had dedicated his will towards life!

This meant that when Joshua succeeded in his breakthrough, he would become an expert candidate who possessed a primary spiritual attribute that was identical to Ves' domain.

Both mech pilot and mech designer shared the same obsession, the same domain and the same spiritual attributes.

This was an incredibly remarkable development and one that was absolutely more profound than Jannzi's promotion!

Only half a minute passed before the Purgatory Envoy's power reactor had returned to full power!

That should have been impossible.

A mech that had just suffered an emergency shutdown should have taken at least two to three minutes to regain full functionality. This was because the power reactor had likely sustained some damage due to its emergency shutdown and slowly needed to test its various subsystems to determine whether they could tolerate the strain.

The forced resonance ignored these realities and forcibly revived the power reactor without issue!

Not only that, the mech's other systems began to show some signs of restoration. Various internal components that had been damaged due to exposure to excessive heat started to function as if they were brand new and fully functional.

This was impossible!

There was no way to explain these changes with conventional theory.

What was taking place right now had exceeded the boundaries of normality and crossed into a territory that was ordinarily reserved for gods!

Joshua had taken his first step towards ascension. From this day onwards, he was no longer purely mortal. He had narrowed the distance to his girlfriend and become a bona-fide expert candidate!

He was the first to do so since the founding of the Larkinson Clan!

All of the activity did not escape the Fortunate Devil. Even though the match had formally ended, its mech pilot was a true warrior and soldier.

Whenever someone challenged him, he was obliged to respond. This was what the MTA stood for. The fight was not yet over until a mech could no longer move!

"Come, young mech pilot! If you want another round, then I shall oblige!"

Even if the MTA mech pilot was facing a brand-new expert candidate who had managed to evoke forced resonance, his fighting spirit had not diminished.

He represented the MTA. Expert candidate or not, he had his own pride!

The Purgatory Envoy began to step towards the Fortunate Devil at greater speed than before! The unstable forced resonance that wrapped around the mech had elevated its performance beyond its technical parameters!

Furious hot flames began to spew from the Purgatory Envoy's arms. They washed towards the Fortunate Devil's feet and melted the remaining armor within seconds.

The Fortunate Devil collapsed!

The revived clash had been decided in an instant!

Every mech designer couldn't believe what had taken place. The mech designed by Jovy stood no chance!

Chapter 2147 Rectification

A shocking outburst took place!

A duel that everyone had written off had produced a completely unexpected development at the end.

Somehow, Joshua Larkinson refused to resign himself to his loss, and single-handedly rewrote reality through sheer willpower!

This was the characteristic ability of expert pilots!

Though Joshua had only just broken through to expert candidate, his promotion was accompanied by a lot of resonance.

So much so that a dam had broken, allowing the new expert candidate to temporarily wield the strength of a higher rank!

Even so, such activities were very strenuous. A violent breakthrough like this was always accompanied with a lot of damage. As soon as the Purgatory Envoy melted the legs of the Fortunate Devil, Joshua basked in his victory.

"I've won. We won!"

Elation suffused his mood as he managed to defeat the MTA in the end. Even though it took an extraordinary amount of effort on his part, he succeeded in fulfilling the expectations set by his benefactor.

The life that suffused his mind and body began to lose strength. He had overstrained his force of will too much. Now that it was no longer necessary for him to maintain this state, the Purgatory Envoy rapidly subsided.

The flickering glow around the mech quickly faded and the mech gradually began to shut down at the command of its mech pilots.

The extraordinary life-based resonance that had formed between the mech, mech pilot and design spirit faded as well.

It had done its job.

As the life around and within the mech faded, the entire incident had come to end.

Soon enough, a team of MTA mech technicians floated into the arena and quickly forced open the cockpit. They pulled out an unconscious Joshua and placed him on a stretcher. A medical officer from the Ubiquitous Force checked him over and intended to bring the young expert candidate back to the ship as fast as possible.

Ves understood the necessity of providing the best care to Joshua. His breakthrough was just as dramatic as the one that Jannzi experienced a few years ago, and back then she was forced to rest in a military hospital for weeks.

With the MTA's excellent standard of care, Ves hoped that Joshua would recover faster and with less side effects.

Every young mech designer who had witnessed the Purgatory Envoy gaining a second life was still in the grip of their astonishment. Not even Jovy, who had witnessed many remarkable sights at the MTA, saw a mech pilot break through in person.

Such events were exceedingly rare, even at the strongholds of the foremost organization on mechs and mech pilots!

The sight of forced resonance dazzled them all. Joshua's furious advancement had made a profound impact on their psyches. The resonance that Joshua managed to evoke also touched their own spirits!

"Well... that happened." Gloriana eventually spoke.

Ves shook himself out of the numerous implications of this unexpected development. "Yes. It seems our Larkinson Clan will welcome a new expert candidate."

Both of them grew happy at the thought of strengthening their clan. Each new expert candidate increased the chance that they would have another expert pilot in the future.

Such strength could not be ignored!

As for Jovy, he was truly stunned. How could he have expected for the champion chosen by his opponent to break through all of a sudden.

"What kind of monster have you been cultivating, Mr. Larkinson?" He asked with shock still running through his bones. "Mech pilots mostly advance to expert candidates in life-and-death battles. It's almost impossible for them to promote when their lives aren't at risk. I have fought more than fifty duels and personally witnessed at least ten times as much. In none of those instances had one of the mech champions achieved a breakthrough. It's too improbable!"

Ves smirked. "As long as there is an infinitesimally chance for someone to break through to expert candidate, it can happen."

As someone who played with probabilities for a living, Jovy could not muster up a response.

While Ves managed to shut up Jovy, that did not mean that Master Willix intended to let matters be! The sudden breakthrough might be a happy event for the Larkinson Clan, but it did not mean that the outcome of the duel had been changed!

"Several minutes ago, I announced the end of the match and declared the victor of his duel." She spoke, causing everyone to shake off their astonishment in order to pay attention to the respected Master. "At that time, the Purgatory Envoy has lost power, causing it to freeze in place for a couple of minutes. In this time, the Fortunate Devil had plenty of time to disable its opponent."

That was true. Even though the Fortunate Devil was a defensive striker mech with lackluster offense, attacking an inert mech was completely different from attacking an active mech!

When a mech lost all movement, it lost the ability to defend itself. Ves knew that the quickest way for the Fortunate Devil to kill his mech in a permanent fashion was to tip the latter over until it collapsed on the arena grounds.

After that, the Fortunate Devil only had to lift its feet and step on the weaker joints of the defenseless Purgatory Envoy.

In fact, if the MTA mech pilot wanted to make an even stronger statement, he could command his mech to place its entire weight onto the chest plating of the downed machine. The sheer amount of pressure applied to the Purgatory Envoy's torso would eventually collapse the cockpit and kill the mech pilot trapped inside!

Naturally, such barbarism would never take place in a formal mech duel. The point of imagining such a hypothetical scenario was to illustrate the fact that Jovy was still the rightful winner of this design duel!

If the Fortunate Devil kept on fighting, Joshua would have never been given enough time to achieve his breakthrough!

"You are right, Master." Ves bowed in order to show his willingness to abide by her ruling. "I am very grateful for the mech pilot of the Fortunate Devil to provide my champion with the space to complete his breakthrough. This result is more than I could have ever hoped for when I accepted Jovy's challenge."

Forget about gaining total ownership of the Darkbreak module. The addition of a new expert candidate to the Larkinson Clan was a much greater prize!

Yet not everyone stood by this ruling.

Even though Master Willix affirmed Jovy as the proper winner of the design duel, the young man himself did not appear jubilant at this announcement.

He felt like he was the one who lost instead of Ves. How could he take pride of his mundane victory when the magnificence that had just taken place overshadowed all of his accomplishments?

Jovy looked up at Master Willix. "While I agree with your interpretation of the events, I would like to object to your ruling."

The Master Mech Designer curiously raised her eyebrow. "Oh? What are your reasons?"

"A design duel is a contest between mech designers. The mechs we design and the mech pilots that we have solicited are part of the contest. When it comes to the design of our mechs, I think my Fortunate Devil is just as good as the Purgatory Envoy. Perhaps my work is even better considering that my specialty has secured a considerable advantage during the match."

"And the mech pilots?"

"In theory, the champion that I have chosen from your staff is better than the champion that Ves has drawn upon. A first-class mech pilot should always crush a third-class mech pilot when everything else is equal. Yet in this, Mr.."

"Joshua Larkinson." Ves supplied.

"Mr. Joshua Larkinson has frankly exceeded the abilities of our own mech pilot, and at a considerable margin at that!" Jovy exclaimed with admiration! "While I'm aware that the circumstances are anything but normal, the fact of the matter is that Mr. Ves has designed a mech that has given Mr. Joshua an opportunity to advance his rank! In this duel, I have not come close to accomplishing the same. Rather than cling to my empty victory, I would rather hand it over to someone who deserves it more."

"I can do so if you wish." Master Willix replied with a serious expression. "Normally speaking, I would never change the outcome of a duel that has already been set, even if

something exceptional has taken place. However, I agree with your sentiment. It is very noble for you to elevate yourself above your competitive sentiments and acknowledge the underlying principles behind design duels. Are you sure you wish to retroactively forfeit this duel and access a loss that you are not obliged to bear?"

"...I do." Jovy answered after he firmed up. He turned to Ves and bowed. "Mr. Larkinson, you deserve this glory. In fact, you already carry this glory. I am just carrying it without deserving it. I would feel much more comfortable if I can rectify this situation!"

How was Ves supposed to respond? "Uhm. Okay."

While he had a mind to act humble and reject Jovy's suggestion, Ves did not wish to let go of the prizes he stood to gain if he won!

2,500 MTA credits!

Permanent ownership of an exclusive Darkbreak module!

Both of these prizes were enough for Ves to go mad at any other day. There was no way he was going to shove them aside in an attempt to make himself look good.

He was already looking forward to all of the combat carriers he could acquire with such a hefty amount of money. Though 2,500 MTA credits sounded deceptively small, when converted into hex credits, he could already buy a factory ship half as big as the one that DIVA had just commissioned on his behalf!

Seeing Jovy's sincerity, Master Willix delayed no longer. "Very well. With both competing mech designers in agreement, I declare that the previous winner has forfeited the duel. As a result, Mr. Larkinson is the final winner of this design duel!"

"Congratulations, Ves!" Gloriana clapped her hands. "I always knew you could do it! You deserve this win!"

Ves smiled. He felt incredibly gratified at this turn of events. Though he still felt his victory was undeserved, he did not say anything due to the allure of all of the winnings he stood to gain.

Just as Ves thought that this event had finally passed, Master Willix made a very pertinent remark.

"It's rather curious, Mr. Larkinson. This is not the first time a mech pilot under your employ has broken through to expert candidate. The odds of any mech pilots advancing to expert candidate is quite small in the Komodo Star Sector. You can pick out 100,000 random mech pilots and still not encounter a single expert candidate or expert pilot!"

Uh oh. It appeared that Master Willix recognized a very dangerous pattern!

Ves tried his best to remain calm. "As a former member of the Larkinson Family, I grew up in the company of expert candidates and expert pilots. I dare say that in the Bright Republic, my old family understood expert pilots the best! I have profited immensely from the wisdom of my fellow Larkinsons. I have always tried to facilitate the emergence of mech pilots, especially within my circle."

The Master Mech Designers stared at Ves with an intrigued expression. "Your Larkinson Family does have a history of cultivating expert pilots. Yet when it comes to you, expert candidates seem to emerge at a considerably higher rate than average. Not all of them are Larkinsons, either. First, there is Jannzi Larkinson, a blood cousin of yours who grew up in your family. Then you have William Urbesh, a former guest of the Rim Guardians and a citizen of the Vicious Mountain Star Sector. Now, you can add Joshua Larkinson to your list, an adopted member of your clan. You have facilitated all of their advancements in just the span of a couple of a few years. That is a remarkably stellar achievement, don't you say?"

How was Ves supposed to respond without getting hauled straight to Centerpoint? He quickly glibbed out a quick reply.

"Uh.. all of those pilots you've mentioned adore my mechs. I specialize in meeting the needs of mech pilots. Evidently, my excellent designs along with my powerful proto-gods have succeeded in unlocking their potential. My products are just that good!"

If nothing else, Ves could always resort to shameless bragging!

Chapter 2148 Unfalsifiable

Though Ves felt uncomfortable, he defended himself as best as possible against Master Willix's inquiries.

He had known from early on that the emergence of expert candidates within the Larkinson Clan would definitely attract attention.

Yet even if the mech pilots under his charge possessed a higher chance of advancement than others, this was not unusual.

Plenty of other groups and organizations that nurtured mech pilots in-house managed to surpass the average.

Just looking at the average rate of advancement to expert candidates in civilized space was not very useful. The individual rate between states, organizations and even mech regiments differed a lot, so much so that a mech pilot in one place was a hundred times likelier to advance than if he went to another place!

Ves put forth two simple arguments to explain why expert candidates seem to pop up like mushrooms under his command.

First, he inherited most of the wisdom and best practices of the Larkinson Family.

The original Larkinson Family was famed for its ability to nurture at least a couple of expert pilots within every generation. Considering the relatively small population size of each age group of Larkinsons, that was a very high rate, though the frequent wars against the Vesia Kingdom helped as well.

It was well-known that once a family or organization boasted a few expert pilots, they were often able to nurture even more! Expert pilots were some of the best teachers imaginable because their skills and understanding towards their profession had reached beyond human levels.

Just like how having a lot of money made it easier to make more money, having a lot of expert pilots often allowed for other expert pilots to emerge!

This was already a powerful defense that Ves believed would deflect most suspicion.

He decided to take it a step further, though. Master Willix was not some faceless MTA snob who could be fobbed off with a single excuse. Ves had to make a more convincing case!

"So what you are saying is that your 'proto-gods' bless your mech pilots...?" She asked in a doubtful tone.

It wasn't often that someone managed to make a Master confused! Even Jovy looked surprised at the gumption displayed by Ves!

"It's very simple." Ves spread his hands and grinned as if he was completely convinced of his theories. "What do all expert pilots have in common? Belief! Conviction! Will! What sustains these beliefs? Emotions! My uncle Ark, a famed expert pilot of the Bright Republic, once told me that emotionless expert pilots don't exist. Those who possess scattered hearts and don't have anything to fight for will never have what it takes to step on the road to godhood. In order to transcend their human nature, mech pilots have to embody it first!"

His statement surprised everyone. Even Master Willix showed some more reaction. "That is an interesting theory. It falls in line what our Association has discovered as well, though we do not phrase it in such a fashion. Human nature..."

"This is part of the reason I developed my current design philosophy. My time growing up among the Larkinsons has given me a very good understanding of mech pilots and what they require. I understood back then that a mech is never devoid from the mech pilot. They are one system, one entity, one partnership! Mech designers who only focus on one but not the other miss the point about mechs!"

"Well said, Ves!" Gloriana cheered and clapped.

Her design philosophy also revolved around this premise! Though Ves and Gloriana disagreed on a lot of matters, it was the few ideas they had in common that allowed them to remain together!

"How does that tie to expert candidates and expert pilots?" Master Willix asked.

"Since I embarked on this career, I have sought a means to help my family members increase their chances of advancing to a greater height. Eventually, I have been fortunate to step onto a path that focuses on empowering both mechs and mech pilots by increasing their symbiosis. After making a lot of progress in my design philosophy, I have eventually made a very important conclusion."

"And that is?"

"Mech pilots aren't the only people who are able to step on the road to godhood!" Ves shouted in his most fanatical act he could muster! "Mechs are able to advance as well!"

Every member of the MTA delegation looked surprised. They did not expect to hear such a radical statement!

Ves didn't care. He continued to spew whatever nonsense that came up in his mind! "I have always believed that mechs are alive. If that is so, then just like mech pilots, mechs can advance and become existences akin to gods as well! For now, I have only been able to create proto-gods and associate them with my mech designs, but that is just the start. As long as they advance step by step, they will eventually reach the heights of ace pilots or god pilots in the future! This is my ultimate ambition! The best way to help mech pilots evolve into gods is to pair them up with mechs that are also capable of becoming gods!"

Though some people such as Master Willix were accustomed to the mention of gods, Jovy looked a lot more confused!

Though the tale spun by Ves sounded strangely compelling, it clashed with the secularists views held by Jovy! As a mech designer who dared to cheat reality itself, he never believed in the existence of supernatural entities with powers beyond human ken.

The questioning did not last much longer. Though Master Willix asked some interesting questions, Ves always returned to the same answers. He deliberately dragged in gods and made exaggerated statements that were essentially unfalsifiable.

This was a very devious debate tactic! Part of the reason why people with faith were so difficult to argue with was because their claims couldn't be proven wrong!

How could you prove that gods did not exist in a scientific manner?

It couldn't be done! Even a great Master Mech Designer like Moira Willix was unable and unwilling to enter this swamp!

Therefore, when Ves kept holding on to this defense, she helplessly stopped inquiring and simply accepted what Ves had said from the onset.

The emergence of expert pilots were correlated by strong beliefs and emotions, and turning mechs into gods was one way to evoke them. LMC mechs were very famed for their ability to affect the moods of others with their glows, and the ones who became affected the most just happened to be their mech pilots!

Now that the duel had come to an end, Master Willix and her entourage soon departed the arena.

"We shall be wrapping up our visit here." She explained. "We have already examined the Little Angel in detail. The two you can expect to receive your latest masterwork certificates within a day. We will look forward to receiving this exquisite masterwork mech in a year. Mr. Armalon, you may spend some time with these young talents if you wish. Despite their origins, they are very remarkable and well worth befriending."

Jovy immediately nodded. "Those are my thoughts as well."

The departure of the serious 'adults' considerably lightened up the mood between the Journeymen. The massive presence of Master Willix no longer loomed over their heads.

This gave Ves a lot of relief! Though Master Willix hadn't departed the Cinach System as of yet, at the very least he didn't need to walk on coals anymore.

"Would you like to head somewhere more comfortable?"

"Certainly."

Ves, Gloriana and Jovy all left the mech arena and headed to a private lounge inside the Larkinson Clan's base.

Along the way, they grew a bit friendlier. While Jovy already built up a considerable amount of respect for Ves, after their design duel, he no longer regarded the winner as an indigenous mech designer.

Ves directly proved that he was not necessarily inferior to his colleagues back at the MTA!

As they entered the lounge and took their seats, Ves could no longer hold in his curiosity.

"Strictly speaking, you didn't have to concede the duel to me. What Master Willix has described is very correct. Why would you take the initiative to forfeit your win?"

The MTA mech designer smiled. "I am genuinely impressed that your mech managed to help a mech pilot reach a higher state. Even if advancement is not a criteria for winning a duel, it is a goal that many mech designers are chasing after. How could I possibly feel as if I bested you when I have yet to achieve this myself? Besides, another win or loss won't affect me all that much. You stand to benefit a lot more than myself. After all, it is not often you hear a local mech designer defeat a representative of the MTA in a fair match."

That answer still didn't satisfy Ves. No one did anything out of the goodness of their heart. He didn't believe that Jovy was as magnanimous as he sounded!

Yet as their conversation continued, Ves began to realize that Jovy truly wasn't putting on airs anymore. The MTA mech designer not only acted very sociable, but also tried to forge a friendship!

It was then that Ves understood Jovy's motivations. The fellow wanted to build up a favorable impression in order to establish a connection with the mech designer who impressed him. Sacrificing a bit of reputation and allowing himself to be used as a stepping stone for someone else might affront others, but people like Jovy easily endured these minor setbacks.

In his mind, befriending the likes of Ves was worth the investment!

This wasn't the first time that Ves met with people who wanted to forge a closer relationship. His fame, reputation and incredible accomplishments had long convinced people such as Calabast and Tristan Wesseling that he was likely destined for greatness!

He did not expect that an elite mech designer like Jovy who would likely have the entire galaxy at his reach in the future would choose the same approach.

Jovy absolutely did not need to reach out to a local mech designer, as he was already in touch with plenty of amazing mech designers in the Association!

"You don't have to sell yourself short, Ves." He spoke. They had already reached first-name basis. "Your design philosophy is both interesting, profound and strong, even if your principles are rather.. strange. Regardless, while you are not the only mech designer who managed to mitigate my specialty to an extent, you are a lot more versatile than those blockheads who only focus on pure defense."

It did not take long for Ves to figure out Jovy's underlying message. "Are you thinking about.. collaborating together?"

A very devious smile appeared on Jovy's face. "Something along those lines. Even though we both possess Class IX design philosophies, I have a feeling that they won't clash. In fact, I am confident we can complement each other! Unfortunately, it's still too early to consider any collaborations at this time. To make it worth it, we need to design a powerful first-class multipurpose mech, and you are far from reaching this point."

This was an amazing offer! Yet the moment Jovy mentioned first-class mechs, the enthusiasm within Ves quickly doused.

"You're right. I'm not ready yet. It will probably take a few decades before I am comfortable with laying my hands on a first-class mech design." Ves modestly responded.

"I'm glad you know your limits. Even so, it would be nice to keep in touch with each other. Even though our classes differ, I believe you are too good to stagnate along the way. The same goes to you, Gloriana. Your Little Angel has already showcased a glimpse of your future ability."

Gloriana imperiously nodded as if that was already a given. "In the future, every mech I make will be a masterwork!"

"Hahaha!" Jovy erupted. "If others make that claim, I usually look down on them. To a masterwork mech designer like you, I have nothing but respect for your ambition. Both of you give me the feeling that the legendary mech touch won't be out of your reach!"

Chapter 2149 Unmasked

The MTA's third visit to Ves soon came to an end.

Master Willix formally completed the certification of the Little Angel. Ves and Gloriana both received official notices that informed them of their new masterwork certificates.

They also gained 500,000 MTA merits each.

Aside from that, Ves also received a whopping sum of 5,000 MTA credits in his personal MTA account. He already considered half it as his participation fee. Even if Jovy didn't concede the design duel, he already had that sum in the bag, but he didn't say no to receiving double.

With this much money, Ves no longer had to wait until the LMC accumulated enough funds to enact one of his spending plans!

He had already sent a message to Major Verle and Ophelia Kronon to look into ordering a large batch of second-class combat carriers and support ships from the Hegemony.

5,000 MTA credits equated to around 900 billion hex credits. This was already incredibly close to the 1 trillion hex credit goal he set to upgrade his entire fleet!

Though Ves felt tempted to spend his winnings on his upcoming factory ship, it wasn't necessary. Her current configuration already gave Ves a lot of confidence. It was more important for him to get rid of the fragile third-class light carriers and other vulnerable vessels in the hands of the Larkinson Clan.

Only when the Larkinson Fleet consisted entirely of second-class ships would Ves be ready to venture into other star sectors!

As for the Darkbreak module, the local MTA branch on Cinach VI promised to deliver it by the end of the day.

When the time arrived where the Ubiquitous Force was scheduled to lift off and return to Centerpoint, Ves and Gloriana approached the landing zone where the armed frigate warmed up her systems.

As the pair bid farewell to Jovy, who floated upwards and passed through the passenger hatch, Master Willix lingered for a while longer.

Though Ves still regarded her as a massive threat to his safety and freedom, he couldn't help but feel a bit more at ease in her presence.

In their three encounters, Master Willix had always treated Ves and Gloriana in a benevolent manner. The MTA didn't entirely consist of elitist jerks who regarded everyone else as lowly space peasants.

Due to the MTA's relatively open recruitment policies, it was impossible for many of them to grow completely out of touch with the humans they guarded.

While Ves wasn't sure whether there were more open-minded people such as Master Willix within the Association, he knew he was lucky to have met her instead of someone from the Prime Human Fraternity of the MTA.

Just as Ves thought that Master Willix wanted to start up another mildly-uncomfortable conversation, she made an astonishing claim!

"I have deciphered your secret."

"What?!" Ves suddenly shook. "I mean, what secret?"

The Master tutted at him. "You do not have to pretend anymore. While I have enjoyed your charade, there is no need for you to hide your secret from me. I know who you are. I am aware of your hidden heritage. Do you really think you can keep secrets from the Mech Trade Association?"

Her words struck straight at his paranoid heart! Had she figured him out after she observed him throughout the design duel? Did he inadvertently slip some clues along the way that revealed his ties to the Five Scrolls Compact?

A chill ran through his spine. If she found out that he was a Holy Son who possessed the Mech Designer System, there was no way the MTA would let go of him! He expected Master Willix to invite him to step aboard the Ubiquitous Force any moment now. Once he entered the ship, he might never be able to escape the clutches of the Association in his life!

Meanwhile, Gloriana shared none of his distress. She looked curiously at him. "What secret are you holding, anyway?"

"You're not helping, Gloriana!"

Ves wanted to cough. Was his girlfriend even on his side?! This was a very serious crisis!

"Don't think your distraction will work. Will you admit it or do I have to say it out loud?" Willix frowned.

Damnit! Even if Master Willix figured him out, Ves still wanted to maintain his facade to the end!

Seeing that he remained as obstinate as ever, the Master Mech Designer no longer held herself back.

"Your design philosophy intrigued me quite a bit once I learned about it." She calmly began. "Your ability to empower mechs with emotions and 'proto-gods' is not weaker than Mr. Armalon's ability to affect probabilities. It is very rare to encounter such a difficult high-grade specialty in someone who's background is as modest as you. A mech designer who emerged from a tiny state such as the Bright Republic cannot develop such a profound and powerful design philosophy without external help!"

Was this the moment where she revealed what the MTA managed to uncover about his mother?

"I do not deny that I had help, but I am bound by secrecy. I can never break my vows!" Ves lied.

"That is understandable." Willix nodded as if she accepted his flimsy excuse! "I won't force you any further. Let me tell you what I have uncovered. I have uncovered the identity of Mr. S."

Did that mean she figured out that he held the much-desired Metal Scroll? The entire MTA would go mad once Willix told the Association of her investigation. Even if she merely ventured a guess, it was enough to call down an entire warfleet on his head!

Ves froze even further. He tried his best to remain still, but he had no idea how much his microexpressions betrayed. The panic welling up in his mind instantly escaped the boundaries of his mask!

"Mr. S... is a very private individual. As far as I'm aware of, he doesn't want anything to do with the MTA."

That was technically true. The Mech Designer System already showed its disdain towards the MTA multiple times!

Ves tried his best to paint the fictional mech designer who had supposedly mentored him as an inaccessible person. Whether it worked or not remained to be seen!

His response only made Willix more confident. She floated closer, causing her to loom even more over his head!

"I was reasonably assured of my guess, but hearing you has raised my confidence level. The abilities that you have shown are too distinct! Mr. S. must be the elusive Ouroboros Designer!"

"The.. what?" Ves genuinely revealed his confusion.

Master Willix looked wistful for a moment. "I have traveled wide and far in the galaxy in my earlier years. While I have spent most of my years in the galactic heartland, I had the privilege to visit the Greater Terran United Confederation. It was at that time that I met the Hero of New Terra at an official function!"

Ves widened his eyes. He recognized that title! Didn't he encounter it a few years ago when he completed another Mastery experience?

"General Axelar Streon is a truly exceptional Terran and ace pilot." Master Willix's tone conveyed genuine respect. "He is truly an example that the Terran Confederation isn't as rotten as it seems. Of course, what is most exceptional about him isn't his heroic bearing. It is his famed mech, which has accompanied his entire career for almost a century!"

She waved her hand, causing an incredibly lifelike projection to appear in front of her. The projection depicted a very powerful ace mech!

"The Ouroboros is one of the most admired mechs of its kind in the galactic center." She spoke as her eyes glinted at its magnificent shape. The mech not only exuded power, but also an exceptional vibe that was not much different from a glow! "The

Serpent of Creation and Destruction has confounded every mech designer who were fortunate enough to witness it in the flesh. Despite its rather humble beginnings and its continuous upgrades, the essence of the mech still remains the same. In fact, it has grown stronger!"

As a rational mech designer, Master Willix rarely raised her voice. She had always maintained a very tight grip on her mood and emotions.

For her to exhibit considerable excitement meant that her admiration towards the Ouroboros was absolutely not simple!

It was not hard to see why the Ouroboros earned such a high regard. When Ves stared at the projection of the hero mech in its current incarnation, it exuded an air that was considerably more powerful than the mech that Ves originally designed for the former drug addict whose body he once possessed!

The Ouroboros, despite passing through the hands of many Terran Seniors and Masters, presented a vision of the future to Ves. It showed how mechs he instilled with life continued to grow with their mech pilots. Not only did they grow stronger, they also evolved and developed their character!

The current Ouroboros had deviated far beyond the initial Creation and Destruction themes he applied to it. Axelar Streon had continuously affected its evolution as the years went by until the famed ace mech completely matched his inclinations!

Now, it seemed that Master Willix had managed to tie the existence of the Ouroboros to Ves! He never expected that one of his products he designed in the past would be able to haunt him in this fashion!

Yet.. Ves also realized the script wasn't entirely right.

"After observing your work so much, I am certain of my judgement. You must be a hidden disciple of the Ouroboros Designer, correct?"

"Wha..? Isn't the Ouroboros supposed to be designed by General Streon himself?"

"That is the story that he has maintained to this day, but our investigation has already made it clear that he never possessed the skill to design the original Ouroboros at the time. We have already concluded that he enlisted the help of a unique mech designer."

The MTA wasn't fooled at all by Axelar's delusions.

Yet because of this judgement, Master Willix developed an unusual theory!

"This is why I am telling you that you do not need to hide any longer. The Ouroboros Designer personally passed on his teachings to you. If not him, then you might be the

disciple of one of his disciples." She continued. "His existence entered our Association's attention more than ninety years ago. That is enough time for Mr. S. to pass on his teachings several times, though you are the only suspect that I am aware of at the moment."

Ves finally realized that Master Willix had missed the mark. Though she had indeed uncovered one of his secrets, she drew an entirely wrong conclusion!

For a moment, he felt rather silly.

Even Gloriana looked astonished. She turned to Ves with an unbelieving expression. "Why didn't you tell me your teacher is a great Master from the galactic center? I can't believe you hid the fact that you studied under a Terran Master mech Designer!"

"Gloriana! It's not what you think!"

"I thought you trusted me! Why didn't you let me know?"

When Master Willix told Ves that she figured him out, he thought he was in trouble.

Instead, the revelation turned out to be a farce! Due to the evidence she gathered, Master Willix became convinced that 'Mr. S.' was the original designer of the Ouroboros.

What she didn't know that Mr. S. did not design this famous mech.

Ves had designed its original incarnation!

Didn't this mean.. that Master Willix accused Ves of being his own student?

This realization caused him to feel very strange but also very relieved. He was incredibly glad that he managed to avoid a calamity.

However, he also felt as if he had plunged into a very strange territory. The evidence that Master Willix pulled up was quite convincing. Anyone who studied the Ouroboros and his mechs would become aware that they shared a lot of commonalities.

If Ves didn't know any better, he would have made the same conclusion as Master Willix!

Chapter 2150 Forgotten Trash

Though Master Willix drew a shocking conclusion about Ves, it was completely untrue!

He didn't know whether he wanted to laugh or cry. How could an incredibly intelligent and astute Master Mech Designer come to the conclusion that Ves was actually his own apprentice?

Just because he traveled back in the past and designed a hero mech for a mech duel, the MTA suddenly developed a theory that the Ouroboros was actually the product of an unfathomable mech designer!

It was not hard to make this conclusion. The glow exuded by the Ouroboros far surpassed any LMC mech. Not even the Quint or the Little Angel could come close to the power exuded by this century-old mech!

Though the Ouroboros started off as a relatively low-quality first-rate hero mech developed with the help of an auto designer program, Axelar somehow never got rid of it. Instead, he stuck by it, likely due to its attractive X-Factor and aura.

As his participation in the brutal Trail of Tears training program managed to unlock his potential, Axelar did not exchange the Ouroboros for a better model.

Instead, he made the rare and unusual choice of upgrading it. Though he had to hire other Senior and Master to do so, all of the mech designers he enlisted all respected the original design of the Ouroboros.

Those skilled high-ranking mech designers carefully tried to preserve the essence of the hero mech that Ves originally imparted in its design. In this fashion, the spiritual character of the Ouroboros never weakened.

Even if it did, the growth it experienced in the hands of an expert candidate, expert pilot and currently ace pilot always compensated for the loss!

Ves already suspected that the spiritual character of an individual mech might experience substantial growth when it was paired with a high-ranking mech designer.

Unlike regular mech pilots and expert candidates, the force of will exhibited by true expert pilots and higher was strong enough to affect reality! There was no way the force of will of such powerful figures would avoid affecting a mech, especially if it contained a bit of life!

Still, Ves found it rather strange that the MTA concluded that the designer of the Ouroboros was some kind of great figure. Master Willix sounded very certain, though, and he had no intention of trying to pop her bubble!

This misunderstanding was of immense help to him! His design philosophy was no longer as inexplicable. If Ves managed to tie his specialty to some fictional Master who originated from the Terran Confederation, then he could keep referring to Mr. S. everytime someone entertained suspicions about his design philosophy.

In fact, becoming associated with a legendary mech like the Ouroboros and a famed ace pilot such as Hero of the New Terra was a blessing in disguise. With the apparent

ties between his specialty and the pairing, he could essentially borrow the latter's reputation in order to deflect uncomfortable probes.

He objected much less to Master Willix's flawed assumptions. Let her believe what her own mind had together out of scattered evidence. As long as her theories didn't have anything to do with the System, everything was fine!

Master Willix gazed at him with genuine appreciation. "The Ouroboros Designer has only sporadically left traces throughout the galaxy. He must have his own plans. As a fellow peer, I will not interfere with his designs on you. Do not betray the expectations of your teacher and strive to fulfill the potential that he has doubtlessly recognized in you. Do you have any further questions?"

"Uhm, I'm good." Ves dully replied.

"Very well. One last reminder. I am obliged to register my deduction to our internal records. You don't have to be concerned about your identity leaking out. The MTA respects all secrets and we will make sure that this detail of yours will remain inaccessible to the public. This is the best that I can offer."

"Okay. That sounds fine."

After an awkward exchange, Master Willix finally entered the Ubiquitous Force, which soon departed from the planet.

Ves still stood frozen while Gloriana turned to him with an indignant expression.

"Secret or not, I expect you to be a little more forthcoming next time!"

She departed his side with a huff.

Though Gloriana sounded peeved, Ves didn't feel very bothered by her. As long as he stuck to his impromptu cover story, she would eventually forgive him. After all, Mr. S. forced him into a vow of silence.

He shrugged and tried to recall his current priorities.

The MTA delegation originally stopped by in order to certify the Little Angel. The design duel that Jovy initiated had been an unexpected development that distracted him from his current plans.

"I should select a mission from the Rim Exchange." He whispered.

The task force that the Military Bureau had assembled was almost ready to go. Major Verle and Fleet Coordinator Ophelia had done an admirable job in prepping all of the mechs, ships and personnel for the upcoming expedition.

According to the most recent reports, the clan already procured all of the supplies the task force needed to remain self-sufficient for up to a year.

Of course, this was just a very vague estimate. Every battle always consumed some supplies, and frequent clashes could quickly drain all of the goods and materials that his forces held in reserve.

Though Ves wanted to bring more supplies, it was very hard to do so without adding more sluggish supply ships to the task force.

That was something he refused to do. His task force had to be as nimble as possible in order to waste as little time as possible in the Nyxian Gap.

Considering that his subordinates had already taken care of everything, Ves did not bother with this matter any further.

He began to think about what else he should do in the few days before his departure.

Ves recalled the design duel and made a couple of important realizations.

First, Joshua Larkinson advanced to expert candidate. This was a significant event and one that he had long anticipated.

"This might be a good occasion to hold a celebration for the entire clan!" He realized.

Holding a huge party right before a portion of the Larkinson Clan engaged in a dangerous venture would definitely boost morale and foster more kinship. There was no reason for him to miss this golden opportunity!

He raised his comm and dispatched a message to Gavin to look into organizing a celebration that involved the entire clan.

"This will also be good for Joshua!"

Ves had long maintained a lot of interest in Joshua Larkinson. The young but talented mech pilot did not disappoint his expectations.

Though Joshua's breakthrough was a bit long in coming considering all of the battles he went through, his force of will was one of the most remarkable that Ves had ever encountered.

After coming into contact with numerous expert pilots, each of which developed a different obsession or conviction, Joshua's force of will centered around a highly interesting domain.

Life!

While Ves wasn't sure of Joshua's actual principles, they definitely related to his specialty! Whenever Joshua piloted an LMC mech or shared his experiences, he always exhibited a sincere respect for life.

Joshua was one of the few mech pilots that Ves knew of who genuinely considered LMC mechs to be living entities rather than lifeless machines.

While it was easy for a random person to look at an LMC mech and state that it was alive, their mind or their heart wasn't really convinced.

Those who believed in the LMC's motto and looked beyond the design spirit were exceedingly rare.

There were plenty of people who misinterpreted the LMC's motto and thought that the source of an LMC mech's glow was alive.

While they weren't wrong, that did not fully encompass his perspective.

Design spirits were alive and they definitely added a lot of vitality to his mech designs, but what if they were absent?

Could mechs still be called alive if Ves neglected to impart a design spirit on their designs?

In his heart, he believed that even his earliest products were alive! His recent breakthroughs concerning spiritual constructs only strengthened his conviction!

Right now, Ves developed a great desire to return to the Purgatory Envoy in order to inspect the innovations he conceived under pressure.

Back then, he was so short of time and in such a focused state that he never had the opportunity to stop and process all of the implications of his latest solutions.

Spiritual constructs and triggered abilities represented a major step forward for his design philosophy! For the first time in years, Ves managed to empower a mech without resorting to messing with design spirits.

This time, he had gone back to his roots and finally recognized that he did not have to leave the spiritual foundation of his mech designs alone.

They were like clay that he could mold into various spiritual constructs!

Not only would he be able to tweak the X-Factor and the glow of his mech designs at a much finer degree of control, he also developed a reliable means of imparting abilities that could be activated on command.

That last part alone was enough to revolutionize his upcoming mech designs! Triggered abilities might not be as powerful as the famed resonance abilities of expert pilots and expert mechs, but they did not come with any prerequisites. Any mech pilot could trigger them at a time and place of their choosing!

When Ves looked up what had happened to the Purgatory Envoy, he immediately raced towards the mech arena where the match had recently taken place.

All of the advanced hardware that the MTA installed in order to monitor the duel and contain all of the damage had already been removed.

Aside from that, the rented facility still hadn't been cleaned up. Plenty of scorch marks and other battle marks still littered the arena grounds. A few puddles of slag and blackened pieces of metal were strewn around the center.

Ves left the hall and entered into a backstage area. Some bots had unceremoniously deposited the damaged and battle-scarred Purgatory Envoy in a corner.

Even though Ves only designed it in 72 hours, he looked at the competition mech with a lot of affection.

He intended to restore and study it until he figured out everything he could derive from the mech!

Just as he began to dream about adding triggered abilities to all of his future mech designs, he suddenly recognized the presence of another mech.

Dumped in another corner, the damaged remains of the Fortunate Devil laid on the floor like a corpse. Its separated legs rested on the side of the mech.

"The MTA.. left Jovy's mech behind?"

Ves almost couldn't believe it. Any work from an MTA mech designer should never be casually dumped, especially one designed by someone with a remarkable design philosophy as Jovy Armalon!

"Then again.. this is hardly his best work." He realized.

Unlike Jovy's genuine first-class multipurpose mech designs, the Fortunate Devil was just a cheap, third-class mech. Due to the terms that Ves had set, the defensive striker mech contained classified components or exclusive technology.

Even if Jovy applied some very sophisticated techniques onto the mech in order to elevate its performance to the best of his ability, there was nothing particularly valuable about the wreck.

The MTA probably regarded it as trash.

Yet Ves saw much more in this forgotten machine. If Ves concentrated very hard and peered closely into the Fortunate Devil, he managed to sense an unknown spiritual trace running throughout the entire mech.

This trace was tied to Jovy's specialty!

Ves immediately thought of trying to harvest this trace.

On its own, it was useless. Without sharing Jovy's domain and unique mindset towards mech, there was no way that Ves could emulate probability manipulation.

"Yet.. what if I do something else with this trace?" He whispered.

What if he used it as an ingredient for a luck-based spiritual product?

Perhaps it was impossible for Ves to replicate Jovy's incredibly strong design philosophy. Yet it was a different story when created with a design spirit that could achieve the same result!

Ves suddenly gained another huge realization.

"Doesn't this mean.. I can potentially imitate every design philosophy imaginable?"