

Mech 2281

Chapter 2281: Restraint Hoop

After some time, his latest spiritual product took shape. Through his deliberate manipulations, Ves formed it into a more definable shape compared to his previous creations.

Artificial design spirits such as the Solemn Guardian, Bravo and so on evolved their forms according to their evolution. What they looked like and how they presented themselves wasn't as important as their inner self.

The Golden Cat and the Superior Mother were different. Ves birthed them with a solid appearance in mind. The Golden Cat would always be a cat while the Superior Mother would always appear in the guise of his mother!

Now that he had come up with another innovation in the form of implanting innate abilities into his artificial creations, Ves felt that he should take another step forward and purposefully define the shapes of his spiritual products.

As a spiritual entity meant to suppress glows and offer relief, Ves decided to mold it into a benevolent shape.

When he came up with the idea, he chose to adopt a marketing mindset. What shape would people be comfortable with? What form allowed his new design spirit to gain an instant measure of trust and appreciation from other people?

He decided upon the shape of an angel.

"Even to secularists like me, angels always evoke a good impression."

Angels were ubiquitous in modern culture and often used in various fictional settings. Ves had watched plenty of fantasy dramas in his youth which prominently featured these holy, white-winged people.

Of course, in some of the old religions of humanity, the true nature of angels was a bit more complicated than that. They were beings of energy and adopted various shapes depending on their role and purpose. The depictions that Ves had seen on the galactic net ranged from psychedelic to horrifying!

There was no way Ves would make his latest spiritual product look like a holy monster in order to be accurate. Even he wouldn't be able to trust a monstrous collection of wings covered by hundreds of eyes!

"It doesn't matter. I'm just borrowing from the predominant cultural perception of angels. It's not like I'm really creating my own heavenly court or anything!"

As he molded his angelic spirit, Ves briefly paused when the question of gender came up. As someone who was able to exert an increasing amount of control over the birth of spiritual entities, he could pick any gender he wanted for his design spirits.

He briefly considered choosing a female in order to please his fiancé, but he quickly shook his head.

"This is not a Hexer spirit! I don't have to cater to her whims all the time!"

He decided to settle for turning his new creation male. The grey phantom which he used as an ingredient possessed a masculine flavor, so he encountered less resistance in the process.

His sixth spiritual product took shape.

The life that welled within the fused collection of shards continued to exert their wondrous effects.

The universal life energy that Ves had derived from the serum had almost disappeared. It was not for nothing though, as the developing spiritual life form rapidly gained strength while achieving a greater degree of wholeness.

What interested him a lot was how the spiritual construct he formed out of the shards of the spiritual restraint had fused seamlessly into his developing creation.

With an abundant amount of life energy from Ves as a medium, the spiritual object retained its distinctive form while simultaneously integrating with the greater whole as if they belonged together.

Ves was afraid that his 'spiritual implant' might dissolve or lose its shape, but fortunately that didn't happen.

Time continued to pass. Ves kept observing the creation process carefully. He no longer had to inject his spiritual energy, but still did so at various points in order to influence the direction of the unborn spirit's growth.

Eventually, the angel spread its sacred white wings and opened its glowing golden eyes!

A pulse emitted from the newborn spiritual product that ran swept throughout the entire vault and continued to expand throughout the entire ship!

Wherever the pulse passed, anything spiritual in nature briefly dimmed!

"Wait, what?! This is dangerous!"

Ves instantly realized that this uncontrolled pulse that heralded the birth of another spiritual entity might mess up some of his stuff!

He turned around and focused his spiritual senses on the Ancient Sarcophagus.

Fortunately, its restrictions were as strong as ever. That made Ves a little suspicious about the red coffin. Perhaps the crystalline creation possessed some of the properties of a B-stone. If not for the fact that the coffin was necessary to keep Nyxie imprisoned, he would have tried to cut off some samples in order to perform some material research!

He turned to his cat. "Are you okay, Lucky?"

"Meow."

His cat felt nothing. The clansmen aboard his ship should feel nothing. Even he wasn't affected by the uncontrolled pulse.

This was by design. As a creation meant to restrain glows and spiritual phenomena, Ves really wasn't assured the angel might be used against him some day.

Even if he managed to instill a considerable amount of loyalty to him and the Larkinson Clan in the spiritual product, life had a way of running out of control.

Living entities weren't always defined by the circumstances of their birth. No matter how many restrictions that Ves programmed into them, the kind of life that Ves created never possessed the rigidity of Als.

Life was all about growth and evolution! If something about them became a hindrance to their survival or ambitions, then they always had the opportunity to change themselves!

For this reason, Ves never put too much stock in behavioral programming. This was why he broke one of his principles for once and carved out a backdoor in his new design spirit's very makeup!

No matter what, the angel's special abilities should never be used against him or any members of the Larkinson Clan!

Ves spent a lot of effort and ingenuity to turn this backdoor into a core aspect of his spiritual product. While it probably wasn't foolproof by any means, it was incredibly hard to subvert this backdoor.

"Hahaha!" He erupted after he noticed that at least one of the features of his new spiritual product worked as he intended. "No matter who you are and who you will turn into, never forget your allegiance!"

The newborn angel might not have much of a personality as of yet, but the copious amount of universal life energy infused in its spiritual existence had likely accelerated its mental development.

The angel was already smart enough to understand Ves. The spiritual entity recognized his own creator and knelt down to show his thanks for coming into existence.

The gesture of obedience pleased Ves immensely! His spiritual senses continued to rake over the winged spirit. A quiet field surrounded the entity, causing the area around him to gain a measure of unnatural calm.

Ves nodded with satisfaction. Even though he could feel the new entity's glow, his spiritual energy received no disturbance. For now, the angel was literally incapable of impeding his creator.

Even if he did, Ves was not weak by any means! He always held a few tricks back against his own creations.

After observing his prostrating angel for some time, Ves pulled out a palm-sized hoop from his pocket.

"I name you Lufa, the Angel of Tranquility! Now, enter this totem that I have fashioned for you. Don't worry. You will be paired with a mech design soon enough."

Lufa's glowing golden eyes pulsed as he received his name. The newborn spiritual entity quickly obeyed his first instructions and entered the hoop that Ves had made.

Ves grinned even wider. The hoop he created was not made out of regular material. Underneath its Breyer alloy exterior was a ring of B-stone!

As expected, Lufa's nature allowed him to ignore the blocking and dampening effect of B-stones!

Seeing that Lufa was safely stowed inside the medium he prepared, Ves approached Nitaa and held out his hand.

"Give me the Larkinson Mandate."

Once he obtained the book, he carefully bound the hoop around the thick medallion that depicted the head of the Golden Cat. The new addition hardly changed the look of the front cover.

The purpose of the hoop was simple. Ves hoped to keep the Angel of Tranquility close to the Golden Cat.

By ensuring constant close contact with the embodiment of the Larkinson Clan, Ves hoped that Lufa would never become estranged to the Larkinsons.

Keeping them in close proximity also served another purpose as well. Goldie's value to the clan was essential, but Ves wasn't sure whether she was capable of defending herself against every possible threat.

More importantly, the Larkinson Mandate was her physical anchor. If anything happened to it, Goldie would surely suffer!

Therefore, adding the Restraint Hoop to the Larkinson Mandate would hopefully protect the book and the ancestral spirit from extraordinary threats.

Was Ves being excessively cautious and paranoid? Probably.

Did he regret going through so many extremes? Not at all!

He might not need this much protection today, but who knew what threats he faced in a couple of decades for now. Ves would rather have too much protection at hand than come up short when he faced an insurmountable enemy!

"Meow."

Lucky floated towards the Larkinson Mandate and sniffed at the Restraint Hoop.

"This is not for you to eat." Ves tapped his gem cat's head.

"Meow meow."

Nyaaaa.

The Golden Cat looked curious as well at the new addition to her 'home'. The B-stone core of the hoop partially reduced her sensitivity, but other than that she didn't suffer any detrimental consequences.

"What do you think about your little brother?"

Nyaa. Nyaa?

"Hmm. That sounds weird. Even though Lufa was made with pieces of you, he's not actually your child. Anyway, can you mentor him for a time? He's completely new and needs to be integrated in his new life. You can pass him over to other friendly design spirits if you like."

Nyaaa!

While Goldie still looked young, she was already eager to exercise some responsibility. She immediately turned to Lufa and began to communicate with the spiritual angel.

Seeing that Lufa was receptive to Goldie, Ves put down his final concerns and returned the book to Nitaa for safekeeping.

After tidying up the vault, Ves returned to his stateroom and began to reflect on the creation process.

Even though he hadn't tested the innate ability that he added to Lufa, he wasn't in a hurry to test it out. There was plenty of time to test Lufa's various properties and abilities when he stabilized his existence and gained a finer grip on how copious amount of power.

Ves ran back the creation process in his mind with the help of his implant. While he hadn't recorded any footage because much of the process happened out of sight, he made sure to record all of his thoughts, emotions and other mental fluctuations in digital form.

Being able to live through them from a detached perspective was a very effective way to reflect on his decisions. He could also spend as much time as he wanted on analyzing every change and reaction that he perceived.

He developed a lot of questions about the nature of B-sontes.

The existence of the spiritual restraint made by some ancient alien jailer proved that it possible to replicate the effect of B-stone.

Ves wondered whether the alien spiritual engineer derived the unique restraint-attributed spiritual energy from a B-stone.

He also wondered whether the reverse was the case. Was it possible to synthesize more B-stones by transforming restraint energy? Would he be able to create other spiritually-reactive exotics with a certain method?

He had no idea!

The onset of all of these questions made him realize how little he truly understood his own specialty. His lack of answers indicated that despite his innovations, his theories were still too shallow!

Chapter 2282: Circumspect

Ves did not mind coming up with questions that he couldn't answer with his current level of understanding.

As an innovative researcher and mech designer, he never feared the unknown!

In fact, in his perspective, running out of questions was a much more frightening prospect!

If Ves was no longer able to come up with interesting questions, then he was no longer a qualified innovator. Clinging too strongly to what he knew was a sign of complacency and lack of ambition.

How could he ever surpass his current self if he no longer possessed the curiosity to explore new phenomena?

This was why he went through with his plan to create a spiritual product that could potentially pose a great threat to him. Compared to the risks he incurred, the potential gains he could make was much greater!

The birth of Lufa already provided him with a wealth of observations that he could study for weeks!

Studying the Angel of Tranquility directly also yielded several new insights to Ves. The young but powerful spiritual product slowly mastered his powers. Much of it was centered on blocking, dampening and suppressing all sorts of spiritual phenomena.

Thanks to the universal life energy that Ves had painfully contributed to his birth, Lufa was already strong enough to replicate the effects of a typical B-stone.

This was a remarkable result!

"If you think about it, there are many similarities between the two! They share the same roots!"

To Ves, Lufa's abilities essentially turned him into a sentient B-stone! Unlike an ordinary B-stone which was completely passive, Ves was able to manipulate Lufa in various ways, causing his latest spiritual product to selectively express his powers.

This was exactly what he needed for the Sanctuary!

Better yet, Ves could even borrow Lufa's powers in a more personal capacity! It was as if he created his own pet B-stone!

"If only I grabbed more phantoms during the temporal anomaly incident!" Ves lamented while smacking the side of his head. "If I didn't waste so much time, I could have grabbed at least three more phantoms with my current level of strength!"

The restraint-attributed energy that Lufa wielded with increasing proficiency came from the spiritual restraints that kept the grey phantoms alive, trapped and in pain.

Without obtaining more of these spiritual engineered products, it was unlikely that Ves would be able to create more helpful life forms like Lufa.

If he was able to breathe half-a-dozen more Lufas to life, then Ves might not need to build an armored suit made out of B-stone anymore. He could just surround himself with his 'angels' and rely on them to withstand any hostile spiritual attacks!

"Well, there's no use getting hung up over lost opportunities." He sighed.

Rather than getting upset over an outcome that was already fixed, Ves preferred to look forward and consider matters that he could still affect.

When Ves briefly peeked into the imaginary realm, he only observed a calm flow of corrosive energy that was devoid of anything remarkable.

It was too much to hope to encounter any trapped grey phantoms. Perhaps the only way to get into contact with them was to enter into another anomalous hazard.

"There's no way I'll expose myself to such a dangerous experience again!"

In order to avoid getting caught in any further anomalies, Ves wanted to leave the Nyxian Gap as soon as possible. Before he did so, his task force had to finish off one more target.

The attack on Ulimo Citadel was scheduled to start within a week. The reason why it took a lot of time was because the Black Cats were already beginning to sneak up and tamper with the outlying vaults that held a lot of weapons of mass destruction.

Before attacking Ulimo Citadel, the Larkinson Clan had to neutralize as many superweapons as possible!

Despite their relatively crude tech, nuclear bombs and upscaled weapon mounts possessed enough power to overwhelm the defenses of second-class mechs!

Not all of the sabotage could be done by human infiltrators. Shortly after the birth of Lufa, Ves entrusted Lucky to Calabast. As soon as the gem cat wore the Misfortune Harness, he began to turn into one of the most effective saboteurs in Maynard Fields and possibly the rest of the Nyxian Gap!

Even so, the Black Cats did not dare to take too many risks in dispatching Lucky to sabotage various critical systems. The Dry Snakes remained on high alert and its various subordinate forces performed frequent ranging patrols, especially around the asteroids that hosted the dangerous vaults.

"Are you sure your stealth shuttle will remain undetected?" Ves asked with worry.

"We already managed to keep it hidden when we initially placed it in the periphery of Ulimo Citadel. We kept it within the range of enemy long-ranged sensors for days as we kept it on standby in case the Mirror Raiders ever became exposed."

"We pulled it back, though."

"That's because the pirates can't be fooled forever. It takes only one mistake to expose our most important infiltration tool."

This was understandable, though it was different now. For some reason, the Black Cats were much more active in their attempts at infiltrating and tampering with some of the perimeter defenses of Ulimo Citadel!

"What has changed?"

Calabast smirked. "With the help of the Mirror Raiders, we have gained a better understanding of our adversary's scanning and sensor technology. A Dry Snake mech won't notice anything if our shuttle flies in front of it! As for the Xona Stalker mechs, they're a bit trickier to fool, but the risks are manageable."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm the expert in these matters. If I am sure about something, I won't act modestly."

Ves peered at her suspiciously. "You've been acting a bit circumspect recently. I know you're up to something. Ever since you presented Ulimo Citadel to us, you have been behaving as if you can't wait to bring it to heel. What is it that you are after, exactly?"

"A girl's got to have some secrets, you know."

"You are hardly a girl."

"Oh, Ves! How cruel! I am still in the prime of my life, you know."

"Old hag."

"Naughty boy."

"Hey! Don't call me that!"

She pressed her finger forward and poked his nose. "You are the definition of a naughty boy. Your unscrupulous experiments on pirates are the embodiment of a Hexer's greatest nightmare!"

"Don't change the topic to something irrelevant." Ves angrily pushed away her finger. "Just tell me directly. What are you chasing after? Why is it so important to proceed with this attack?"

His pleas fell on deaf ears. Calabast chuckled and stretched out to ruffle his hair. "That's not for you to know. Not now. Not when everything is still uncertain. The situation can change at any moment. Just trust me. With my help, breaching Ulimo Citadel's defenses is not impossible."

Ves hated spies and their penchant for keeping secrets. If the power dynamic between him and his strategic partner wasn't so weird, he would have used his authority to coerce her into opening her mouth.

As it was, Ves eventually gave up and allowed Calabast to play her games. He left to inspect the other preparations.

He visited the Redfeather in order to check up on the Avatars of Myth. As soon as he stepped aboard the ship, he noticed that the loss of the Nova Krakow and her entire crew still affected the Avatars to some extent.

Despite Major Verle's efforts, it was not so easy for Avatars to forget about the lives of hundreds of brothers and sisters.

When Ves talked to Jannzi and Joshua, they both expressed their feelings.

"I could have done something to prevent the Nova Krakow from disappearing." Jannzi lamented. Her calm facade broke as soon as she talked about the tragedy. "My body was stuck in time, but my mind was still working. If I exerted some more, I might have been able to break the freezing effect on my body."

Ves looked skeptical. "Anomalous hazards are far more powerful than you think. Let alone an expert candidate, even an expert pilot can't withstand the cosmic forces that are responsible for causing these reality-warping eruptions. There is no need to feel guilty, Jannzi."

"Even the Big Two can't do anything about these anomalies." Joshua concurred and placed his hand across her shoulder.

"Let's focus on the Larkinsons we can save in the attack that we'll launch on Ulimo Citadel." Ves urged. "If you keep moping like this, you won't be fighting at your best. I'm not telling you to let it go, Jannzi, but there are plenty of Larkinsons who escaped this calamity. Will you let them down because of a past regret?"

"...No." Jannzi said. She slowly began to regain her fighting spirit. "You're right, Ves. Mourning the lost should never get in the way of protecting the living. I know what to do now. Thank you for your concern."

"No problem. You are one of our most important champions. Fight well. If I have some time in the future, I'll upgrade the Aurora Titan to a full second-class mech design based on the upgrades that I have applied to the Shield of Samar. Your mech won't be fitted with a dinky polarizing module anymore. I'll try my best to fit it with a fully-fledged shield generator."

Her Shield of Samar was still a very strong defensive mech. However, as the Larkinson Clan gained more second-class mechs, the Aurora Titan-derived mech became increasingly less relevant.

Many Bright Warrior mechs were able to fend off almost just as much attacks as Jannzi's custom mech!

Both of them were clad with copious amounts of Breyer alloy. The Shield of Samar possessed a greater advantage due to its larger frame and its thicker shield, but it was woefully inadequate as a whole.

"I am still pleased with my mech. You don't need to go out of your way to upgrade the Shield of Samar immediately."

Ves smiled. "Strengthening your mech will strengthen you. Strengthening you will strengthen our clan. Don't neglect your value."

"Will you upgrade the Bright Warrior design as well? A lot of Avatars have already reached the standard of a second-class mech pilot. The Bright Warriors are constraining us at this point."

"Oh? Your Avatars are that eager to pilot better machines?"

"Despite the comfortable glows of our machine, some of our mech pilots would rather pilot a more powerful virtual mech. We can barely satisfy our craving for powerful mechs in simulations. They're not realistic enough."

That was an interesting development. While it was still impractical to supply his upgraded mech pilots with ready-made second-class mechs, they seem to be doing okay by resorting to virtual solutions.

"Be patient, Joshua. The Bright Warrior is still a young design. I need to gather more data and observe the long-term use of this mech by its pilots before I'm confident in tackling the Mark II version. I want to do the Larkinsons justice with this product line. The Bright Warrior mech is the future backbone of the Larkinson Clan!"

As a modular mech platform that came in four configurations, the Bright Warrior served as the base of Major Verle's mech doctrine. The mech was both powerful and versatile enough to meet most of what the senior mech officer sought!

"We can also use more variety." Joshua requested. "Our Larkinson Clan still needs a light skirmisher. Tusa has been complaining to me almost every day. He's pretty jealous at us because we both pilot your mechs on a daily basis."

He almost forgot about that. Ves had exchanged his precious DP to learn more about light skirmishers, but so far he hadn't done anything with what he gained.

"I'll speak to Tusa later." He promised. "It will probably take a year, if not two for him to obtain his own mech. We'll make it worth it, though."

The Larkinson Clan urgently needed to add more light mechs in its mech lineup!

Chapter 2283: Repressed Voice

An empty star system welcomed a rare visitor. The Serendipity flew silently through dust-laden space. After reaching a desolate coordinate, two mechs launched from the frigate.

The Star Dancer flew splendidly through the particles of sand and dust that filled the local space.

A more mundane rifleman mech followed the expert mech. They flew several hundred kilometers forward until they suddenly came to halt.

The two Hexer mechs floated in silence while their sensors observed the site with exacting detail.

"I thought there would be more." Davia Stark eventually spoke through their private communication channel. "There is not a single trace of the sandman emperor."

Brutus grunted. "There is no debris. The CFA warfleet must have swept the battlefield for every piece of ship components that the sandmen have managed to knock loose."

The CFA broadcasted their attack on the capital of the sandman empire on the galactic net, allowing many people to witness the near-debacle.

No one thought the sandmen race had transformed an entire planet into one of the biggest sandman amalgamation ever known!

Not even the arrogant Fridaymen and Hexers could remain calm against such a horrifying threat!

The CFA's punitive attack almost ended in failure. If the CFA warships weren't so powerful, they would have been crushed by the living planet!

Fortunately, the might of one of humanity's apex organizations was much more formidable than the sandman emperor could cope with. The CFA warships survived the sneak attack and the alien planet suffered their wrath!

Now, only a huge cloud of inert sand remained of this huge amalgamation.

The sight of the sandman race's biggest loss did not provide Davia with the satisfaction she desired.

A profound sense of emptiness and disappointment ran through her body. She had dreamt so long about visiting the grave of the sandman empire. Unfortunately, the CFA left nothing behind! Their vengeful warship shattered every piece of rock that was larger than a fist!

Even so, the two mechs lingered in the orbit of the former planet. Half an hour passed as Davia and remained introspective.

Brutus eventually broke the silence.

"Are you satisfied?"

"No. Not at all."

"This is the fate that aliens deserve after attacking humanity." Brutus spoke. "From the moment that the sandmen crossed our border, they were doomed to die."

"They died too late. The MTA and CFA ignored our pleas for help."

"That's true."

"The Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony ignored our plight as well." Davia accused in a more acid tone.

"That is true as well." Brutus readily admitted. "I do not deny the callousness displayed by my state. I have already explained our considerations to you. My fellow Hexers never took the sandmen seriously. They care even less about the lives of the third-raters."

They held this argument many times. While Davia was willing to travel along with Brutus, that did not mean she was ready to join the Hegemony.

In fact, she felt even more repelled at the thought of joining the Hegemony! From the beginning to the end, the Hegemony never lifted its finger to assist the border states in fending off the sandmen!

She saw the Hexers in the same light as the other arrogant people who possessed the power to help, but didn't! The Fridaymen, Hexers, mechers and fleeters all earned her ire for abdicating their responsibility to defend humanity against alien threats!

"At least Ves Larkinson has done his best to resist the sandmen!" Davia suddenly cursed. "A lone third-rate mech designer has done more to save the citizens of our neglected states than any of you 'superior' folk!"

"Calm down, Davia. Your emotions are boiling over! Your mech is transmitting worrying telemetry about your mental state!"

"How can I calm down after traveling through so many star systems scoured by the sandmen? How can I keep my composure when I realize how much forewarning that humanity has received about the invading sandmen. Even when this race uprooted its entire empire to descend upon the Vindmar Republic, none of you have dispatched anything more than scouts and disaster tourists! Are we not human? Do our lives not matter?"

"I am disappointed in my state as well. I'm sure that many of my Hexers wanted to help. It's just that we don't have a voice either."

"That's a lie!" Davia angrily barked. "Every human has a voice! No matter if you're a first-rater or a third-rater, every human is supposed to be treated with dignity. Yet none of that is true? To many of you, the cries of a single first-rater is louder than the screams of trillions of third-raters! None of you bother to open your ears to the latter because you don't care about us! All you Hexers think about is winning your stupid rivalry against the Fridaymen. All the MTA cares about is winning their pissing match against the CFA. Does no one care about protecting our race against external threats?!"

"I do care, Davia! Please don't mistake us as unfeeling. The Hegemony is filled with loving mothers, caring sons and helpful daughters! From the outside, we are known for our strength, but within our borders, we love each other and constantly work to achieve our ideal society."

"Hah! You haven't refuted my point at all! You Hexers only care for yourselves." She hissed. "You have so much wealth and power. For over four centuries, you sat in the most prosperous territories of our star sector, and yet what did you do? You Hexers hoarded all of your riches, letting none of it flow out to the underdeveloped third-rate states that could have used some help! How much wealthier would we be if you second-raters shared just a fraction of your wealth?"

"We do contribute to the development of lesser states, Davia! Our government invests 0.0006 percent of its annual budget to charitable causes. We have educated millions of repressed women in the less prosperous parts of the star sector. While I admit that we could have done more to help your compatriots out, we are not as heartless as you think."

"DO NOT DECEIVE ME, BRUTUS! I know what your people are like! I have spent months on the same ship as you. Do you know how your crew are looking at me? Not with respect, that's for sure! Even the 'boys' on your ship view me as an insect rather than a human."

Her mental activity became more and more unstable. Alarms began to ring in the cockpit of her mech, but Davia didn't care about her own health. She had witnessed too much ruin during the journey to this star system!

"How many years have passed since our race has reached the stars? How many alien empires have we toppled in order to stop the threats against our own people? How could we have failed to learn the lessons of the Age of Conquest? Four hundred years after the end of human genocide, we are still consumed by the same obsessions that have haunted us in the past! All you care about is fighting against our fellow humans. Do you know how sad that looks to me? We have not progressed a single step as a race!"

Even though Brutus tried to tamper her down, Davia no longer registered his words! The mech she piloted began to swing its rifle around as if it was ready to shoot!

"Why did our race develop in this way? When did we stop caring about the threat of aliens? When did we begin to see each other as archenemies? Doesn't anyone in charge care about the weakest of our civilization? I hate what people like you have turned into. I hate how little regard the Big Two possesses towards the plight of those they call 'space peasants'. I hate how mechs are used to fight against fellow humans ever since they were first invented!"

Brutus reacted with shock at her statement! While he had guessed that Davia accumulated some grievances, he had underestimated the depths of her fury.

This was not a normal outburst! Her damaged mind amplified her pain and magnified her rage!

"Is this what mech pilots like us are for, Brutus? Are we solely trained to fight against other humans? We are better than this! Our power can be used for so much more! The Sand War may have been terrible, but many humans who are weak and inconsequential in your eyes have summoned the courage to stand up against the sandmen! That is true courage! That is true honor! That is true glory! In this measure, Ves Larkinson is a thousand times more noble than a pampered boy on a leash like you! The only Hexer who deserves my respect is your sister! At least she contributed, unlike the trillions of other Hexers in your powerful state!"

"Davia.. I know you're angry, but please calm down. Your mind will collapse if you keep this up! The doctors on my ship are very alarmed!"

"SHUT UP! You Hexers don't care about any third-raters! Our society is flawed. From what I see, greed is rampant and selfishness is the norm. I don't blame you Hexers for clinging onto your wealth and power. I have been disappointed too much by people like you to expect any true compassion. In the end, despite the belated intervention of the Big Two, it was third-raters like us who held the line! We don't need your help! Those of us who were born in poorer states can take care of OURSELVES!"

The moment she spoke those words, her emotional activity had reached a limit!

The Star Dancer visibly jerked back from Davia's mech as it began to erupt!

A vague red glow began to surround the rifleman mech. Brutus watched with astonishment as the outcome he had been hoping for finally became a reality.

Davia had regained her power as an expert pilot!

Not only that, but Brutus could visibly feel that her resonance strength was growing rapidly!

Yet this was not how he wanted to see her restored!

Throughout all of the days they spent on the same ship, Brutus had always sensed a kindred spirit in Davia Stark. Even as broken as she appeared, the Hexer expert pilot sensed her inherent compassion and urge to protect her fellow people.

He thought that as long as he healed her back together, humanity would regain another noble expert pilot!

Yet now, it looked as if Davia Stark had undergone a drastic transformation!

This was something that he had never heard of. Expert pilots weren't supposed to change their nature! Yet somehow, the resentment and fury that Davia had accumulated completely engulfed her original conviction!

The resonating glow around the standard Hexer mech solidified, signifying that Davia Stark had successfully regained her strength as a demi-god.

Yet this was not what he sought!

Brutus quickly glanced at the resonance sensor. Davia Stark's resonance strength had peaked at 18.74 laveres, which was much stronger than he expected!

That was more than Brutus had ever achieved! He remembered that his own peak strength reached just 15.35 laveres, and that was when he was in his best state!

Of course, he was a lot younger than the middle-aged woman he tried to help, and he doubtlessly possessed a lot more untapped potential.

Yet from Davia's sudden growth, Brutus momentarily feared what she might become. How would she use her strength? Who did she want to fight against?

The grudges she held against the powerful had become the source of her strength. Brutus was afraid that the only way for her to develop as an expert pilot was to deepen her ire against immensely powerful states and organizations!

The forced resonance surrounding Davia's mech quickly faded. The mech quickly turned dormant, signifying that Davia had suddenly lost consciousness.

It seemed that her breakthrough was a lot more volatile than she could handle!

The Star Dancer hovered silently next to the frozen mech. Eventually, the expert mech carefully grasped Davia's machine and brought it back to the Serendipity.

Chapter 2284: Stopgap Solutions

The Marrakath System had fallen!

Ever since the Komodo War began, several star systems had already begun to change hands.

None of them were very important. Even if the enemy took them over, they could always be taken back.

There were too many planets and star systems in space. Even powerful states such as the Friday Coalition and Hexadric Hegemony knew that it was futile to turn every one of them into impenetrable fortresses.

Also, due to the properties of FTL drives and the extreme distances they were capable of traversing, no wall was impenetrable.

What truly mattered in the long run was holding key star systems. These star systems possessed several strategically important endowments, ranging from rich exotic deposits, a large existing infrastructure, a large productive workforce or close proximity to a lot of other valuable star systems.

The Carnegie Group happened to turn the Crestfallen Stars into their first line of defense!

Though the Fridaymen never bet all of their chips on holding these fortified star systems, they at least wanted to bleed the Hex Army of hundreds of thousands or even millions of mech pilots!

In this final struggle for supremacy in this remote star sector, both sides knew they needed to deplete each other's war-making potential!

Considering the abundant material resources that both states stockpiled during centuries of peace, it would take far too long to deplete each other's resources.

Conquering territory and taking over the enemy's resources, industrial capacity, trade and population was possible, but only up to an extent. While the Hexers believed they possessed the might to overrun their archenemy, the Fridaymen were a lot more realistic about their chances!

In a war like this, the critical resource that both sides needed to preserve the most was their mech pilots.

It couldn't be helped. Unlike resources such as Kavenit, mech pilots couldn't be stockpiled over a long period of time. Neither state was capable of increasing the amount of mech pilots in a short amount of time after the outbreak of the Komodo War.

While the Fridaymen and Hexers hastily put their neglected low aptitude potentates through a crash course training in piloting mechs, it still took at least a couple of years to yield some results.

Until then, the war revolved around diminishing each other's pool of mech pilots as much as possible!

From the perspective of the Fridaymen, this plan was bound to work as long as they lured their hated enemies in unfavorable battles.

Aware of the arrogance and conceit of the Hexers, the Carnegie Group and the Vermeer Group had long given up on launching any offenses.

Launching an attack was always costlier than defending a stronghold.

Therefore, the two coalition partners expressly invested in fortifying a lot of star systems, each of which they considered expendable despite the ludicrous sums of col pumped into their defenses!

Up until a point, the plan appeared to work.

The entry of the infamous Blessed Squire changed everything!

The Hex Army's Wrathful Doves may have lost a lot of mechs and mech pilots, but the Fortune Legion's Opal Tridents failed to meet their quota! The bedraggled survivors evacuated Marrakath III and the rest of the star system in haste, prioritizing the retrieval of people over war materiel.

The Opal Tridents suffered a shameful defeat! Though they preserved enough manpower to fight again another day, the sudden abandonment of so much mechs, production equipment, supplies and lots of other gear would set them back for months, preventing them from playing any role in the next couple of months.

It was different for the Wrathful Doves! Though the Hexers bled heavily in order to topple the Marrakath System, their morale was skyhigh and their eagerness to battle again had reached a peak!

"We will go down in history as the first Hexers to conquer a Fridayman fortress system! Let us thank the Superior Mother for giving us strength!"

"For the Hegemony! For the Superior Mother!"

The fall of the Marrakath System triggered a chain reaction.

First, the Wrathful Doves earned an immense amount of glory and honor for their great service. Conquering Marrakath ahead of schedule in such an overwhelming fashion while preserving most of their mech pilots made the next steps of the Hex Army so much easier!

While the Wrathful Doves needed to secure their new prize and weren't quite ready to transfer to another battlefield, most of the reinforcements no longer headed to Marrakath.

Aside from sending second line garrison troops to take over Marrakath's defense, the other reinforcements changed their route to the other remaining Crestfallen Stars!

The pressure against the Fortune Legion units stationed there intensified as the Hexers built up a greater and greater numerical advantage.

On top of that, after weeks of deliberation, procrastination, arguing, dealmaking and persuasion, the council of matriarchs in charge of approving mech designs finally made the decision that more and more combat troops were waiting for. The Hexer leaders finally permitted the Hex Army to deploy the Blessed Squire model in every battlefield!

"We can finally use our new mechs!"

"We could have used them weeks ago! While I respect the matriarchs, they have no idea how many sisters we've lost since then! Why couldn't they approve the Blessed Squire faster?"

"Don't complain. At least we can see what the fuss is about!"

Hours after the Blessed Squire received official sanction, many frontline mech army groups and mech divisions began to deploy the supportive knight mech in great quantities!

Each of these Hexers units had already diverted their production capacity to build up a stockpile of Blessed Squires.

The fact that a significant portion of the Hex Army already built hundreds of thousands of Blessed Squires had already forced the hand of the council of matriarchs.

Rather than permitting that something could be done, the matriarchs essentially acknowledged reality.

The rest of the Hex Army had learned from the example set by DIVA and the Wrathful Doves. Instead of introducing the Blessed Squire mechs onto the battlefield one by one, the individual Hex Army units smashed thousands of them across the frontlines all at once!

"Don't let the Fridaymen get used to the Blessed Squire's glow or whatever it's called. We need to ride our momentum all the way to victory!"

The idea was sound, and the plan largely worked.

The Fridaymen mech units put up considerably more resistance this time. Now that they became aware of the horrifying influence this foreign mech design could make, the Fortune Legion and other mech militaries had already drawn up some responses!

While the Coalition's Master Mech Designers were rapidly trying to develop effective counters against this heinous mech design, the Fridaymen settled for several stopgap solutions.

"Bombard the enemy positions! Snipe those Blessed Squires! Don't let the Hexers get close!"

Hundreds of Hexer mechs attempted to assault a Fridayman stronghold in a burning city. The Hexer assault unit adopted an unusual formation where a large number of male and female Hexer mechs protected the latest addition to their mech roster!

In ordinary circumstances, the female supremacists never showed this much care for expendable male mechs!

Yet before the Hexer mechs could make much progress, explosions began to rain down from the sky! Massed artillery peppered their ranks with shells and other ordnance without any regard for cost.

Crack!

Sharp laser beams, powerful positron beams and thunderous gauss rounds flooded the escorts of the Blessed Squires. The knight mechs and other defensive mechs strained to withstand the focused firepower, and the less well-protected mechs did not last long if they didn't move out of the way!

"The blasted Fridaymen want to take out our Blessed Squires from a distance!"

"Don't let them! We need to protect our sons at all costs!"

"We can't! Their firepower is too much."

"Despicable cowards! Fight us up close if you dare!"

Even without a specific counter against the Blessed Squire, the mech designers and analysts of the Friday Coalition had already developed an effective tactic against this devilish Hexer mech.

Just take them out from range!

There were three properties of the Blessed Squire that made them so powerful.

First, their energy siphoning and energy transferring capabilities significantly extended the deployment time of other Hexer mechs.

Second, their glows invigorated every Hexer mech pilots in a radius that was able to encompass an entire mech company under ideal conditions.

Third, the same glows also damaged the morale and concentration of enemy mech pilots in the same radius!

All of these points shared a common element. They were only effective in close range!

"The Blessed Squires are one of the most effective force multipliers the Hex Army has fielded to date, but they are not omnipotent!" A Fridayman staff officer briefed hundreds of attentive mech commanders by remote. "Of the three points that I have just listed, only the second one is valid as long as the Hexer units haven't collided against our own units. Keeping this new Hexer mech model at bay will minimize its advantages."

The logic sounded simple, but it was undeniably true. In the other six Crestfallen Stars, the initial introduction of the Blessed Squire immediately encountered the response that the Fridaymen had long prepared.

"Don't let it get close!"

"Shoot it from a distance!"

"Empty our entire ammunition reserves if necessary!"

In order to slow down the collapse of the Crestfallen Stars and buy time for critical star systems to evacuate their critical infrastructure and personnel, the Fortune Legion invested heavily in their response.

Just like how the Sand War drove many states to revive the use of Starfighters, the Fortune Legion units all began to employ old-fashioned artillery pieces!

These hastily-fabricated and disposable cannons were installed in almost every major fortification. The Fridaymen readily emptied their huge stockpiles of explosive shells and allocated a lot more industrial capacity into fabricating more.

"Turn the battlefield in a sea of flame and explosions!"

"Bomb them until they can't take a step forward!"

"No knight mech can withstand our firepower!"

For a time, these tactics worked. The Hexers possessed a bias for melee combat, and much of the Hex Army's mech doctrine revolved around relying on the might of melee mechs to achieve quick, decisive victories.

Even so, the Hexers weren't weak at range! While the Hex Army honestly did not expect the Fridaymen to rely so heavily on bombardment, the response came quick.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

A rain of shells attempted to destroy a stationary artillery battery deployed by the Fortune Legion. The norms crewing the artillery cannons cowered and flinched from the shells exploding against the energy shield that had been erected over their position.

"The firepower is too much! Our shield is rapidly losing its charge! At this rate, it will break in forty seconds!"

In another artillery position, a squad of Hexer aerial mechs fired their plasma rifles at their targets. Unfortunately, due to scarcity, no shield generator protected this site, thereby causing the auxiliaries and their artillery cannons to succumb in a sea of immense heat and plasma!

At a different location, A Hexer mech company supported by a Blessed Squire had attacked an artillery battery from the flank! The defending Fridaymen mechs put up a good fight, but their defense lines started to buckle as its mech pilots weren't accustomed to the Blessed Squire's disturbing glow.

A trio of light skirmishers evaded the defenders and stormed over to the artillery pieces.

Crack!

A shield blocked their path!

However, the female Hexer mech pilots only grinned at the sight.

"Let's exhaust this shield!"

The mechs did not employ their daggers. Instead, they simply bashed their frames against the energy-based hindrance. The immense kinetic energy transferred by the Hexer mechs rapidly consumed the shield until it finally popped out of existence!

"Kill!"

Though the slaughter was immense, the deployment of so many artillery batteries helped mitigate the impact of the Blessed Squire's entry into the frontlines, at least for a time.

In addition, the Friday Coalition's existing ranged mechs all prioritized the Blessed Squires above any other strategically important target. To the Hexers who often relied on riling themselves up to fight without fear, the Blessed Squire had become one of their best tools to generate momentum!

Naturally, the ranged mechs of the Hex Army did not allow their foes to do as they wished!

With the Hexer mech units concentrating their knight mechs and other defensive mechs around their Blessed Squires, it took an immense amount of firepower to chew through all of that resistance.

The same could not be said for the Fridayman's ranged mechs! Even though they often took advantage of walls and fixed defenses, the fact that they numbered so much meant that they were vulnerable to being defeated in detail, especially when the Fridaymen ranged mechs did not suppress their Hexer counterparts!

Under these evolving dynamics, the frontlines of the Komodo War became more turbulent.

Chapter 2285: Glow Limitations

"Some of the shortcomings of your specialty have come to light." Gloriana pointed out. "By resorting heavily on ranged attacks, our Blessed Squires are being shot left and right before they can even make it to the enemy lines."

Her physical projection leaned against Ves. The realism of the Darkbreak module's projection technology was so great that it was as if her body was actually aboard the Scarlet Rose!

This time they did not employ this fantastic tech for its original purpose. They had too much work to do to waste their time on expressing their love.

Both of them paid closer attention to the progress of the Komodo War since one of their products finally entered the field.

Ves enjoyed Gloriana's projected warmth as he studied the limited amount of footage and reports he received from DIVA.

Tracking the performance of the Blessed Squire was crucial to the development of their subsequent Hexer mechs!

From what he had seen so far, every Hexer mech regiment that received the Blessed Squire had already embraced the new product wholeheartedly.

Neither their males or females neglected this useful mech model and made sure to treat it with reverence.

To many Hexers, it was unthinkable to employ the Blessed Squire as cannon fodder!

Part of it was due to its desirable glow. The Superior Mother seemed to resonate with Hexers of every gender and every background. From the lowest classes of commoners to the noble and arrogant highborn females descended from the matriarchal dynasties, everyone who grew up as a Hexer inexplicably valued the Blessed Squires once they experienced its glow!

Certainly, there were plenty of conservative Hexers who feared this drastic change and suspected that some form of brainwashing was at work, but the victories this mech enabled slowly wormed away their stubbornness!

While it was too early to tell whether the Blessed Squire changed the views of the Hexers to a more boy-friendly ideology, the signs so far were modestly optimistic.

"What are you grinning about?! This is a serious problem, and this is just the prelude. The Friday Coalition will unveil other responses soon enough!"

"It's fine, Gloriana. The Blessed Squire is still fulfilling its purpose, if not as one-sided. First, the Blessed Squire will always be able to support other Hexers. If it can't effectively boost friendly melee mechs, then it can still boost friendly ranged mechs!"

"The differences aren't as big. Emotions play a much bigger factor at close range. In a long-ranged firefight, the material performance of mechs play a much greater role."

She was right. Melee combat was quick, fast, brutal and visceral. Mech pilots needed to have the grit and confidence to confront an enemy mech that swung a heavy implement that could easily inflict heavy damage at an instant!

The Blessed Squire always provided the Hexer mech pilots with great advantages in these situations. Unfortunately, some of the utility it provided became invalid when the Hexers failed to close the distance.

Though Gloriana looked quite upset at this development, Ves was a bit more nonchalant about it. As the principal designer of this mech, he had already anticipated this kind of response.

It made too much sense to do so. A mech whose greatest strength only took effect at a limited range around its frame would always become a priority target at range!

"I'm afraid our Blessed Squire won't be as valued by the Hex Army anymore after this." Gloriana quivered.

"It's okay." Ves whispered. "The Blessed Squire is not a fragile mech. It's a knight mech with a shield, so the Fridaymen always have to invest a lot of firepower into taking it out. In the meantime, Hexer ranged mechs aren't as constrained and can focus their firepower on more vulnerable targets. Therefore, even if the Blessed Squire can't play a role, its presence on the battlefield still imposes some constraints on the Fridaymen!"

This was how real battles were fought between states. From some of his previous Mastery experiences, he knew that the development and use of different mech models constantly evolved.

Even when suppressed, the Blessed Squire still added value to the Hex Army, so Ves did not share Gloriana's pessimism.

Besides, the Fridaymen hadn't unveiled their killer weapons yet. The Miracle Couple's true crisis began the moment the Fridaymen Masters rolled out their counters against his specialty!

Considering the formidable design capabilities of Masters, they probably already developed numerous candidates. They were probably being tested in secret labs at this time.

Gloriana raised another topic of concern. "I'm worried about our Valkyrie Redeemer. As an aerial mech that primarily relies on spear charges to take out its foes, its very vulnerable to ranged attacks."

"The same applies to every aerial mech, Gloriana. This is hardly unique to our Valkyrie Redeemer. Different from the Blessed Squire, our second Hexer mech can selectively project its death-based glow to any distant target. That alleviates the range limitation a

bit. Also, our marauder mech is also designed to fight away from the frontlines, so it won't encounter as much ranged firepower."

"My fellow Hexers won't value our mechs that much if they keep encountering so much focused resistance. In the long term, we'll become less valued if this keeps up. I think we need to develop some effective ranged mechs as soon as possible!"

The worry and urgency in her tone betrayed her need for validation. Ever since the Blessed Squire accelerated the takeover of Marrakath, her fame and reputation in the Hegemony had grown dramatically!

The thought of losing all of these gains made her desperate!

Ves kissed her projected cheek and tried to comfort her. "There is no point in rushing ourselves. Let's finish our current projects first before embarking on other ones. In the meantime, we can observe all of the counters the Fridaymen will eventually bring to bear against our initial products. Once we know what they are capable of, we can implement specific countermeasures in our subsequent Hexer mechs."

"You're.. right." She sighed. "I'm being too hasty. I'm just infuriated at the rampant bullying of our babies. They can hardly poke out their heads these days without getting shot!"

Though the Blessed Squires still provided the Hex Army with some advantages, Ves agreed with his partner that it was better to introduce some ranged mechs in the near future.

Ves felt the need to prove that his mechs also provided a competitive advantage at range!

It was not as if Ves already designed successful ranged mechs. The Desolate Soldier and Deliverer mechs both achieved great results in the Sand War.

The challenge was that it wasn't enough to boost their morale anymore. The Blessed Squire already fulfilled that role to some extent. Designing a ranged mech with a similar glow as their first Hexer mech introduced too little variety.

Perhaps the Hexers might even regard him as a one-trick pony!

The pair began to swap some ideas on what their next Hexer mechs should offer.

"It has to differentiate itself from both existing Hexer military mechs and our Blessed Squires." She told him. "Maybe we can apply the ranged glow mechanic of the Valkyrie Redeemer to our third Hexer design project, but that is not enough I think."

Ves pursed his lips. "The impact of exposing an enemy mech pilot to a ranged glow is not as drastic when it comes from a ranged mech. The reason why I believe the Valkyrie Redeemer pairs well with this mechanic is because it complements its charge attack. Everyone fears a mech barreling down on your position! What my glow does is to amplify this fear in order to hamper the response of the victim. This dynamic is largely absent in a ranged firefight."

"Then what can we do to give our ranged Hexer mech an advantage in this situation? We can't afford to shame the majesty of a Supreme! The Fridaymen must fear her and submit to her in order to do right by your mother!"

He jerked when she said that. Ves felt like vomiting. His mother might be a soul-sucking ghost, but she was no tyrant! At least that he knew of. Who knew what her past was like.

"Ahem." He coughed. "I've learned some new tricks recently. I've already told you about the breakthrough that I've made in our Sanctuary Project. I'll see if I can apply them to our other projects. However, I do admit it is rather tricky to make a ranged mech stand out. Even though my glows sound great, they mainly affect mech pilots. At its core, my design philosophy has always centered on increasing the integration between mechs and mech pilots. My solution will have to come from this direction."

This was his greatest strength but also his greatest constraint. While he entertained some radical ideas, he did not forget that his primary focus was never about enhancing the technical performance of his mechs.

That was Gloriana's responsibility.

Instead, he should find his own way to increase the applicability of his specialty in ranged combat.

Several ideas passed through his mind. Many of them weren't viable.

"You know, one of your cousins has started to make a name for himself in the Friday Coalition. He's famed for bringing around a bunch of quasi-expert mechs and using them to overwhelm opposing expert mechs with a flood of ranged attacks."

Ah yes, Venerable Ghanso. Ves harbored a lot of loathing for this obstinate Larkinson.

"What are you trying to say?"

"While Ghanso deserves death for killing so many Hexer war heroes, I have to admit that Master Huron has developed a novel way of increasing the effective power of expert pilots. From what our spies have managed to uncover, Ghanso's mind is neurally linked with all of those quasi-expert mechs."

"I know. Aisling explained some of Master Huron's work to me during the brief time I was her captive. I didn't know that this Master's specialty could be applied in this way."

Gloriana grinned at him. "Why not steal his idea? Can you apply your glow in a way that allows Hexers to connect each other with the help of the Superior Mother? She's so powerful! There has to be a way, right?!"

"Woah, there! Do you even know what you are talking about?! This sounds crazy! It's already dangerous enough to mess with neural connections. Forming these connections through glows sounds absolutely crazy!"

In fact, Ves did not believe it was as impossible as he made it out to be. The Superior Mother already acted as the hub of an immense spiritual network. Though the strength of this network paled in comparison to the Larkinson Network, he believed it might be possible to link the participants together in some way.

That didn't mean he was eager to do so, however! Such a radical innovation would definitely reveal too much about his specialty! He didn't even need to guess that Master Willix would immediately pay him a friendly visit and 'invite' him to stay with her at Halcyon Citadel for an indeterminate period of time.

Some lines simply couldn't be crossed!

He argued a bit with Gloriana until she finally dropped her dangerous proposal.

"Spoilsport." She grumbled. "What are we supposed to do, then? Can't you persuade the Ylvainan proto-god to lend his powers to the Hexer cause?"

"That's impossible. Ylvaine only blesses his own devoted. That has always been the rule. Providing Hexer ranged mechs with predictive targeting is off the table."

They didn't have a lot of good ideas after ruling out this option.

Eventually, they called it a day.

"We still have months to flesh out our design concept. There's no hurry."

"I'm aware, Ves. It's just that I'm afraid we won't have anything good by the time we are supposed to embark on our next projects."

"Just because I don't have any good ideas at the moment doesn't mean this will stay this way in the future. I'm constantly progressing my design philosophy. I'll try my best to expand in this direction in order to make our ranged mechs just as useful as our melee mechs."

"You better!"

Chapter 2286: The Creativity of the Young

After his discussion with Gloriana, Ves continued to think about the problem that she presented.

Finding a new way to make his glows useful in ranged combat was not easy. Aside from the effects he already achieved, he really wanted to expand his arsenal without resorting to borrowing the powers of other design spirits.

He wanted to keep every Hexer mech as pure as possible. Lately, Ves felt that he was relying way too much on the unique properties of different design spirits to bail him out whenever he needed to achieve something difficult.

The development of spiritual constructs and triggered abilities was supposed to pull him back from developing an overdependence on external design spirits.

As powerful as they were, Ves was unable to exert a lot of control over them. As a mech designer, he much preferred to maintain some precise control over the advantages that he was able to bestow onto his products.

His recent preoccupation with spiritual engineering allowed him to rediscover the charm of creating precise solutions. So far, he believed he had barely scratched the surface of spiritual constructs.

As Ves supervised the design teams working diligently on their respective assignments, he continued to mull over the possibilities.

His methods of strengthening his products should always center around the mech pilot.

So far, his main solutions fell into two broad categories. He either enhanced or suppressed the morale of mech pilots. He did so by manipulating specific emotions such as appealing to their sense of duty or triggering their primal fears.

While many of his mech designs had achieved considerable success by accomplishing these methods, Ves no longer became satisfied with these options.

"They're too rudimentary for me to feel proud of." He muttered to himself. "My entire design philosophy should not amount to this. Making mechs alive should bring more to the table!"

Intuitively, Ves sensed that he had come to an important stage in his development as a mech designer.

Journeyman like him progressed to Senior by expanding their options, deepening their applications and exploring the greater possibilities of their design philosophies.

What Ves was able to accomplish at this moment was very helpful in waging psychological warfare, but he didn't want to limit himself in this corner for the rest of his life!

This was especially so because he knew his current solutions did not make much of a difference as the quality of mech pilots rose.

Ves had already noticed from the footage of the Blessed Squire in action that elite mech pilots from both sides experienced much less changes when affected by glows.

To the superbly-trained Hexer elites, their minds were as strong as steel and their confidence in their own strength was already through the roof. A bit of additional courage and mental support hardly boosted their performance!

As for the elite Fridaymen mech pilots who braved the Blessed Squire's glow, they quickly got used to the discomfort pressing on their minds.

In their training, they endured much greater hardships! Their tolerance for pain and other forms of harm were already high in order to ensure they remained high-spirited in the toughest of situations!

The Fridaymen and Hexers weren't unique in this sense. Ves recalled that Master Willix and a significant portion of her entourage easily endured the terrifying glow of the Doom Guard up close!

"The power of the human mind is not weak!" He concluded. "Glows might be effective against regular mech pilots, but the strong are different. I need to develop a different set of solutions to affect their performance!"

This was very relevant when he considered his aim of traveling to the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy.

In the early years, only the most ambitious and most successful galactic pioneers were capable of reaching this new frontier!

Ves easily imagined that many of the enemies he might stumble upon would be fielding lots of well-trained mech pilots. If he solely relied on his old tricks to win his battles, then he wouldn't achieve as much success as he did against Nyxian pirates.

Additionally, Ves noticed that his glows didn't even exert any discernible effects on expert pilots. They were so strong-willed that no amount of external influencing was able to shake their beliefs!

He needed to ensure that his specialty remained relevant in expert mechs and other high-performing machines!

Limiting himself to enhancing the value to cannon fodder mechs sounded incredibly depressing to Ves. How would he be able to justify designing his own expert mechs if his contributions in those projects were marginal?

"Arghh!"

After fruitlessly trying to figure out his own solutions on his, he decided that maybe it was better to hear out other people.

Just recently, Ves had managed to gain several important insights on heavy mechs by hearing out the opinions of Commander Orfan and Zanthar.

"If it worked once, maybe it can work again."

For this reason, Ves decided to pull Maikel Larkinson out of his homework assignment and bring him to an office.

"Please sit down."

"Uhm, okay."

"I'm sure you must be wondering why I called you here. As far as I know, you have developed a fascination for my design philosophy, is that correct?"

The young Larkinson nodded. "I really admire you for inventing something that is different and unique. It's so different from what everyone expects from mechs. I want to be able to do what you can do one day."

"A good mech designer is someone who is able to innovate, Maikel. It's not a good idea for you to set your goal on my applications. If you haven't done the hard work of inventing them from scratch, I very much doubt you will be able to achieve a worthwhile career."

The earnest warning did not affect Maikel's determination. "I don't want to do anything else. Designing living mechs is your greatest ability. It should become the Larkinson Clan's ability as well!"

That was a surprisingly high-minded idea coming out of someone as young as Maikel!

"You may have a point, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. You are currently just a first year mech design student in my eyes. You still have several years of study ahead of yourselves. The more you become exposed to the possibilities of mech design, the more options you'll contemplate."

"I already know what I want. Didn't you teach me to be decisive? I want to design my own living mechs!"

"If you are so determined to follow my direction, then at least find your own way to differentiate yourself!"

"I'll try, teacher." Maikel promised.

That was the best that Ves could hope for at the moment. Personally, he doubted whether his student was able to develop the same traits that enabled him to adopt his unconventional design philosophy.

That said, as long as Maikel branched out and followed a path that was suitable for him, it wasn't impossible for him to design something related to Ves' work!

Ves attempted to direct the conversation towards his current goals.

"Since you are eager to build on my work, maybe it will help if we talk about what I do. Now, let me warn you that you are in a very impressionable period in your development. When an older and more established mech designer expounds upon his design philosophy, a young and inexperienced individual such as you might easily be contaminated by my views! In the mech industry, this is frowned upon because it is too easy to set you up for a research direction that originally isn't compatible with your inclinations."

Maikel remained brave. "I don't see that as a bad thing. Aren't my inclinations already the same as yours?"

Ugh. Ves wanted to palm his face. "Fine then. Since you're my student, you have already been exposed to my influence."

He pushed aside his concerns and began to speak.

"My design philosophy isn't capable of strengthening mechs directly. It's not supposed to, strictly. This is something that you should already be aware of. What I can do instead is to deepen the integration between mech and mech pilot..."

Maikel already knew some of what Ves was saying, but this was the first time he learned about his teacher's specialty in such a clear and coherent fashion.

The student eagerly lapped it all up. It was as if he was relieving a hunger that had plagued him for months!

"...and this is why my design philosophy is called Metaphysical Man-Machine Symbiosis. Each of those words are important. Now, do you have any questions or remarks?"

It took some time for Maikel to organize his thoughts.

"How exactly are your mechs able to fight better?"

"As I've told you, it's all about designing my mechs around the mech pilot first. Currently, I'm able to deepen their integration so that the mech pilot can pilot his machine more optimally. I'm also able to bestow glows to my mechs to affect the morale of nearby friendlies and enemies. I'm mostly known for the latter these days."

"Does that mean you neglected the former?" Maikel innocently asked.

"Uhm.. my research time is limited." Ves answered. "In the past few years, I have been expanding what I can do with glows because I found them to be very effective in increasing the value of my mechs. However, I'm starting to reach a plateau of what I can do with them. Glows are only a single addition to a mech. There are many other ways to make your product stronger."

"It doesn't really sound like that your glows are related to integrating mechs and mech pilots, teacher. I mean, if your design philosophy is Metaphysical Man-Machine Symbiosis, shouldn't you be trying to figure out ways to make mechs more like humans and humans more like mechs?"

Ves reacted with surprise at Maikel's suggestion. It sounded quite compelling!

"Elaborate, please."

"Well, maybe it's because I don't know exactly what you're capable of, but when I hear what you want to accomplish, I think that your design philosophy is mainly about making mech pilots better. In one of your earlier lessons, you told us that mechs are already strong, but their performance is constrained by the limitations of the mech pilots. The latter are only human, after all. Why not focus on shoring up their weaknesses?"

"...Let me think for a bit."

What Maikel put forward didn't sound complicated, but it was a direction that Ves had never really considered!

The more he thought about it, the more he thought it was feasible!

Instead of enhancing the mech pilots of his mechs by manipulating their emotions, what if he could enhance them in a more direct fashion?

"Maybe you can figure out a way to increase a mech pilot's marksmanship if you're designing a rifleman mech." Maikel suggested. "Maybe find a way to increase the reaction time of the mech pilot of a light skirmisher. Can you do this? Maybe it's too much to hope for, but I think that plenty of mech pilots would be glad to pilot a machine that can increase their skill!"

"I think you are onto something." Ves began to smile. "It's interesting, but it's not quite what I'm looking for. It's doubtful that I can accomplish the effects that you have described."

Instantly turning a bad mech pilot into a good one by causing the mech to dump a lot of skills in them was impossible with his current capabilities.

It also possessed the same limitations as glows. This solution was mostly useful to lower grades of mech pilots. Elites and expert pilots didn't need this kind of help!

Even so, this fresh direction expanded his horizons. What could he do to empower the mech pilot? What kind of solution would help the Hexer mech pilots gain an advantage in the Komodo War?

"Interesting." He whispered.

A forgotten idea rose up in his mind. While it may not entirely be possible to strengthen a mech if he relied on deepening the integration between mech and mech pilot alone, what if he added the design spirit to the equation?

What if he could turn his mechs into actual avatars?

Chapter 2287: Doubting Himself

Sometimes, talking and teaching about something that he knew intimately still generated some new insights.

Talking about his design philosophy with Maikel provided Ves with a fair amount of food for thought.

Before this discussion, whenever Ves always directed his attention towards the more advanced applications of his specialty. He tinkered with design spirits, glows, spiritual constructs, spiritual augments, triggered abilities, innate abilities and so on on a daily basis.

He had good reason to do so. He needed to obtain a lot of power to achieve his purposes, and he couldn't do so without resorting to the formidable arsenal of spiritual techniques he developed over the years.

Ves had come a long way since he first became an Apprentice who couldn't accomplish anything more than bestow a little X-Factor to his mech designs!

With the help of his innovations, the Living Mech Company grew to a behemoth that sold hundreds of thousands of mechs on a monthly basis.

Due to the threat of his glow-oriented mech designs, hundreds if not more high-ranking mech designers had spent more than a trillion hex credits to study them in order to form counters.

The potential of his design philosophy earned him the appreciation of the likes of Master Moira Willix and plenty of other authoritative figures in the mech industry.

Oh, he also became engaged with Gloriana as well. Despite her many.. eccentricities, she was one of the few people who trusted him and he could trust in turn. That was extremely valuable in a galaxy where trust was hard to find.

Certainly, the benefits he obtained from the System enabled many of his accomplishments. Yet Ves did not let himself be limited by his greatest secret, but sought to surpass it. Although the System initially pushed him on this path, he formed and developed his design philosophy up to this point through his own efforts.

His constant urge to innovate and seek greater gains had yielded many successes.

"However... am I losing sight of my initial goals?"

Since when did his design philosophy center around glows?

Why should he constantly seek to create more powerful design spirits?

Long after Maikel left to do his homework, Ves remained silent in his office.

Great doubt stirred in his mind.

He started to question his own purpose.

"Do I regret the path I've taken and the decisions I've made?"

Nope. Not at all. Though he had made plenty of mistakes and dubious decisions up to this point, he rarely felt regret. The decisions he made and the outcomes he obtained shaped him as a person and a mech designer.

He always looked forward. He spent most of his time planning and working towards a better future. No matter his inadequacies today, he would be able to meet all of his goals once he advanced far enough to have a real say on the galactic stage.

His drive advance reinforced his tendency to look forward. He spent so much time chasing after greater gains that he never really looked back all that often.

"Is this a mistake?"

Perhaps. Perhaps not. Ves always feared he would stagnate if he became too preoccupied with the past. Slowing down in any way had become one a taboo of sorts to him. The example of Professor Velten who engaged in too many distractions over the course of her career provided him with a very clear image of what he might end up if he slowed down.

It was only recently that he recognized how far he had gone astray. Obsessing over glows and turning them into the primary feature of his mechs caused him to overlook that his design philosophy never centered around them. The auras that his mechs and most notably his design spirits produced were supposed to be welcome additions at best.

Now that he was starting to bump into the limitations of glows, Ves recognized that it might be better for him to return to his original approach. He had already done so recently with the exploration of spiritual constructs, but so far he had mainly used them to enhance the operation of his glows rather than his mechs.

"My perspective is wrong."

Glows and design spirits were merely tools. Both existed to enhance the performance of the mech and mech pilot in some way.

What Ves realized today was that he used to focus on other ways to improve the performance of this pairing.

In the beginning, Ves attempted to accomplish the more modest goal of integrating mechs and mech pilots. He sought to increase their synergy by increasing the X-Factor of his designs.

What was his definition of X-Factor?

To him, the X-Factor represented the alignment between mech, mech pilot and mech designer.

During his rise to prominence, Ves no longer relied entirely on his own strength as a mech designer and instead resorted to external help in the form of design spirits.

In essence, the X-Factor of all of his recent mechs actually reflected the alignment between mech, mech pilot and design spirit!

Was this bad? Not necessarily. Undoubtedly, this paradigm yielded a lot of success.

The latent problem was that success in the short term did not guarantee success in the long term.

To become a Senior who possessed great control over many applications, Ves needed to explore different options while remaining true to his heart.

To become a Master and realize profound and unique design philosophy, Ves had to find a way to transcend his limitations and achieve the impossible.

"My design philosophy has never been about creating gods. Why am I trying so hard to do so lately?"

Perhaps spending a lot of time with Gloriana warped his views. Even though he always rejected her ambition to create gods in the form of mechs, she may have succeeded in contaminating him through constant repetition.

Ves reflected back on his latest three spiritual products.

The Golden Cat and the Superior Mother both surpassed the definition of design spirit. By tying them to the Larkinson Clan and the Hexer people respectively, they had already taken on at least some of the properties traditionally associated with the divine.

As for Lufa, Ves literally dubbed it the Angel of Tranquility!

Did he regret creating these three pseudo-divine entities? No. Each of them were very useful in their own way.

"Not regretting doesn't mean that what I'm doing is right."

The development of design spirits and glows was always supposed to be a side path. They complemented his design philosophy. They were never supposed to take it over.

No matter how much it pleased his fiancé to continue down the path of creating gods, to Ves this was only supposed to be a means to an end.

What was the end he sought?

"Making mechs alive."

The nuance here was that the definitions of those words were subject to interpretation. There were different ways he could think of to bestow life to mechs.

Instilling them with a design spirit and integrating the two together was one way to do it. The Devil Tiger was perhaps the best embodiment of this approach.

Pursuing glows to an extreme in order to make everyone acknowledge his mechs was another way. Mechs such as the Doom Guard and the Blessed Squire closely aligned with this approach.

When had he last designed a mech that just sought to integrate the mech and mech pilot in a plain manner?

Ves found to his disappointment that none of his original mechs matched this criteria. He felt as if he was inputting a search term, only to obtain no valid results.

"Have I gone that far off-track?"

Strictly speaking, Ves didn't entirely believe that he had gone astray since his Apprentice days. He just went overboard with playing with a new toy that his mother introduced a couple of years ago. If she hadn't gifted him with a novelty in the form of the spiritual fragment of a long-dead alien leader, he would have continued to make use of spiritual images and other modest techniques to add value to his mech designs.

If he had to make a choice of which mech designs best represented his aspiration to make mechs alive by integrating them with their mech pilots, then he would go as far back as picking the Young Blood and Old Soul virtual designs!

His goal in designing these two mechs was to augment the learning of mech cadets. By allowing them to gain closer bonds with mechs that were set up to mentor future mech pilots, Ves believed he succeeded in helping a lot of potentates achieve greater success in the future!

"Isn't Joshua one of them?" Ves recalled.

He decided to perform a little investigation. He activated the desk terminal and began to look up what people thought about his old Young Blood and Old Soul virtual designs.

[Thank you for selling this great mech! The Young Blood helped me so much when I was struggling with piloting melee mechs. With the help of this knight mech, I can finally pass my melee mech courses!]

[It's been four years since I first piloted the Old Soul. I initially thought this mech was a joke due to its slow-firing rifle and ambush orientation. I was wrong! This mech not only helped me graduate at the top of my class in marksmanship, but also taught me the value of patience and good planning. I wouldn't have been able to enter the mech officer track of my advanced academy without pouring thousands of hours in mastering this mech!]

Despite their rough and rudimentary design properties, both training mechs earned a lot of praise.

Ten minutes passed as Ves smiled in contentment. Even though the two virtual designs were filled with flaws to his current self, they nonetheless managed to earn the gratitude of hundreds of thousands of Iron Spirit players!

While that didn't sound like much compared to the sheer number of professional mech pilots who piloted his real mechs, Ves felt that the praise of these mech cadets was much more authentic.

The mech cadets who piloted his Young Blood and Old Soul praised his actual work.

The professional mech pilots who piloted his Desolate Soldier and Blessed Squire fawned over their glows and design spirits.

While Ves could argue that the latter was also a reflection of his strength and ability as a mech designer, he couldn't quite agree with this sentiment.

He decided to take a look at his current design projects.

He manipulated the desk terminal to project all six design projects side by side.

The Valkyrie Redeemer.

The Cat's Paw.

The Chiron.

The Ferocious Piranha.

The Sanctuary.

The Crystal Lord Mark II.

Each of these designs incorporated some of his latest applications.

Before, he felt very proud of them. Now, he no longer felt pleased.

Almost all of his designs had become overly dependent on their glows. This was a design choice that Ves was so accustomed to making that he had stopped questioning it. By making the same choice on autopilot everytime he embarked on a new design project, he slowly began to lose touch with the essence of his design philosophy!

Ves took a deep breath. "It's not too late. I can still reorient myself."

Did that mean that he intended to abandon the use of glows and design spirits? No. He just wanted to lower their emphasis in favor of empowering his mech designs according to his original intentions.

He still wanted to design mechs which allowed his mech pilots to embody their design spirits.

He also wished to design mechs that blurred the difference between man and machine.

As Maikel put it, making the human closer to a machine and making the mech closer to human should be his ultimate goal!

"It's a bit funny how a teenager has taught me the meaning of my own design philosophy." He smirked.

It proved that even the best and most successful mech designers were still fallible!

Chapter 2288: Growing Trees

While Ves processed his doubts, Task Force Predator continued to gear up for their biggest battle to date.

The Black Cats under the lead of Calabast had become extraordinarily active. Each and every black-uniformed Larkinson became preoccupied with figuring out Ulimo Citadel's in order to undermine its defenses.

From both without and within, the spies of the Larkinson Clan gradually gained a better understanding of the pirate base.

Much of what they learned only added to the pressure subjected to the task force!

The 4200 pirate mechs that defended the pirate stronghold was the least of the clan's worries.

The hundreds of superweapons that were stored in the vaults or installed in various hidden sites were easily capable of destroying the task force at least twenty times over if the pirates unleashed all of them at once!

Therefore, the key to conquering Ulimo Citadel always centered around neutralizing as many secret weapons as possible. There was no way that the task force was able to avoid suffering massive casualties if the pirates were still able to access just a dozen of their secret weapons!

As could be imagined, sabotaging so many destructive weapon systems at once was an immense endeavor! The difficulty rose even further due to the need to keep every act of sabotage secret while the pirates were on high alert!

Even with the various advantages of the Larkinson Clan, Ves seriously doubted whether the Black Cats had what it took to dismantle Ulimo Citadel to such an extent.

Yet the results surprised him. Reports continued to arrive that spoke of rigging warship-grade cannons to blow and other forms of sabotage.

Lucky had become incredibly busy this past week. With the Misfortune Harness, he slowly penetrated deeper and deeper into Ulimo's security perimeter.

At the same time, the Black Cats intensified their coordination with the men inside Ulimo Base. The Mirror Raiders, who managed to earn a measure of trust and responsibility from the pirates, kept stirring the pot while doing their best to appear completely committed to defending the pirate stronghold.

The massive operation to attack Ulimo Citadel seemed to stimulate the potential of tens of thousands of Larkinsons. Almost each and every clansman in the fleet invested their full effort in improving their chances of winning the upcoming battle!

With just a day to go until Major Verle wanted to commence the grand assault, Ves shook the hands of Master Willix's projection. His face looked pained as he just concluded another deal.

"I hope the MTA will abide by the promises you've made." He said.

"There won't be a problem, Mr. Larkinson." The projection let go of his hand. "While we are fairly rigid when it comes to rules, we are willing to grant exceptions when the need is great. Naturally, we don't do this for free."

"I understand."

"For what it's worth, I will cheer you on. You and your Larkinsons are doing a great service by removing one of the tumors of the Nyxian Gap. Without Ulimo Citadel, many smaller pirate outfits will lose the channel where they can obtain more prohibited weapons."

Ves couldn't help but voice one of his doubts. "The amount of superweapons at Ulimo is very exaggerated, and I doubt it's the only pirate stronghold that boasts so much destructive power. The rest of the Nyxian Gap is probably just as bad. Will the MTA really stand back and let the pirates accumulate enough forbidden hardware to threaten an entire state?"

"This is not an easy subject matter, Mr. Larkinson. While I cannot reveal our internal deliberations about this subject to you, know that the MTA has not gained its position of strength in the galaxy by remaining passive. Our incursion into the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy is only one of our more public endeavors."

Obviously, she wasn't going to say anything more than this. Ves half suspected that she was utterly serious about handling the Nyxian Gap. Whatever the MTA had in store, Ves wouldn't be a part of it. He just wanted to smash one more pirate base before getting out as fast as possible.

Before Ves ended the call, he decided to take advantage of Master Willix's good mood. After all, Ves paid a very great price to obtain some concessions from the MTA. This was the best opportunity to gain some answers to some of his mech design-related questions!

"If you don't mind, can you explain what a Journeyman needs to do to advance to Senior? What exactly is the latter and why are they better?"

Master Willix looked intrigued. "Those are some very big questions, Mr. Larkinson. You are still a very young Journeyman. The process to advance to Senior is difficult and lengthy. While it is technically easier to advance to Senior because any Journeyman has the potential to do so, in practice you need to work hard and remain persistent in exploring what you are capable of. To become a Journeyman means you are qualified to explore the breadth and depth of your design philosophy."

"So what does that actually mean?" Ves looked confused. "Other mech designers often tell me that I need to explore and expand the applications of my specialty. What I am struggling with is that I don't know how much I need to branch out and how much depth I should aim for. Why should Journeymen be doing all of this? How will this enable me to become a Senior?"

"You are too impatient, Mr. Larkinson. The road to becoming a Senior is long and time-consuming. I highly recommend you not to become fixated with advancing to the next rank. No matter how much of a genius you are, it will typically take at least a couple of decades for even the most prodigious Journeymen to make this jump. As for how they know they are ready, the sublimation process will happen naturally after making sufficient gains."

That only sounded vaguely helpful to Ves. Master Willix noticed his confusion.

"There is a very helpful analogy in the mech industry that might help you visualize the advancement process from Journeyman. First, imagine that you are trying to grow a tree."

"A tree?"

"Yes. This tree of yours represents your design philosophy. At your current stage, it should just be a sapling, though I suspect you have outgrown many of your peers due to all of your notable accomplishments. Regardless, your little tree still has much more room for growth. What is important is that you and every other Journeyman can direct the growth of your trees."

Was this how the MTA and other high-ranking mech designers viewed the design seeds of Journeymen? Ves found it surprisingly apt.

"Some of you want to widen the applications of your design philosophies." Willix continued. "This means that they aim to grow more branches on the trees in order to make them wider and broader. Others wish to strengthen their limited number of applications to an extreme. Their trees will grow taller but remain narrow. There are other Journeymen who wish to obtain the best of both worlds and seek to develop many applications while attempting to explore each and every one of them to their limits."

This was a very simple and understandable way to visualize the development of Journeymen! Ves easily understood what Master Willix was trying to convey. With just a simple explanation, she had managed to clear many of his doubts and uncertainties about the way forward!

"I take it that the Journeyman in question can choose for himself what kind of tree he wants to grow, correct?"

Master Willix nodded. "That is true, but some design philosophies are more conducive to specific tree shapes. There is no right answer."

"Oh? Isn't it best to go for the third option and try to grow a tall and wide tree?"

"Not necessarily. This is just an analogy. It doesn't completely reflect your actual development process. Nonetheless, it still illustrates some of the approaches available for you. Do you want to fulfill a single goal as best as possible? Do you want to develop hundreds of different applications? Or do you wish to engage in both, knowing that you won't be able to achieve as much success in either?"

Ves couldn't answer this question right now

He wanted to reach and surpass the limits of his design philosophy.

He also wanted to develop a diverse set of solutions.

"Are the three approaches you mentioned the only ones that are valid?" He asked.

"No. Far from it. They encompass the majority of the approaches eventually adopted by Journeymen, but there are stranger mech designers in the galaxy who grew their trees in an abnormal fashion."

"Uhm, okay?"

"Don't force yourself to follow a specific approach." Master Willix warned. "Just follow your whims and do what you think can help you progress a step further. If you decide to grow a tall and narrow tree, don't think that it is less valuable. Mech designers who dedicated themselves to achieving a single goal have made incredible accomplishments. As for those who grew short and wide trees, their design philosophies have gone on to introduce entire paradigms in the field of mech design."

"What about the last kind of tree?"

"The mech designers who possess endless ambition and try to grow the widest and tallest of trees rarely make it to Master. They can become some of the most powerful Seniors in the mech industry, but they mostly run out of years before they can make the final step."

"Those who managed to advance to Master despite these challenges must be extremely powerful, right?"

Master Willix smiled. "No. Not necessarily. In this case, the work you put into your progression is not proportional to the results. No matter the profoundness of your design philosophy, every mech designer who advances to Master only gains a fixed amount of strength. Those who focused on a narrow pursuit can invest all of that strength on one application, thereby reaching even greater extremes. Those who have branched out wide must invest all of that added strength equally."

"That sounds rather bad."

"I disagree. If mech designers developed a design philosophy that is set up to enable a lot of possibilities with only a modest amount of effort, then they aren't necessarily weaker."

Ves thought for a bit. "I see now why growing tall and wide trees might not be a good idea. If you only gain a fixed amount of strength, then it's like attempting to water a huge tree with a single bucket. There is not enough water to keep the tree alive."

"You can say that. Mind you, there are mech designers who have accomplished this anyway, but their circumstances are unique and shouldn't be used as role models. What I would like to emphasize is that it is best to let your tree grow in a manner that fits your inclinations best. You can consider the implications of your tree once it matures at the Senior stage."

They talked a bit more before Master Willix finally ended the call.

As the Darkbreak module returned to standby, Ves stayed in place as he went over the implications of what Master Willix had revealed.

How did his young tree look like?

"It should look pretty wide, seeing how I've branched out so much. I'm worried that it's too short, though."

Of the two conventional options, Ves wasn't sure whether he should aim for growing a tall or narrow tree or a short and wide tree.

"It depends on the goals I'm trying to achieve."

So far, he was still inclined towards the latter. He liked to develop a lot of tricks and have multiple options at his disposal. As long as he achieved his ambition of making mechs alive, there was not that much point in making them more alive. He would rather develop multiple viable applications because he was very big on combining them in order to achieve synergy.

In contrast, someone like Ketis readily set aside everything in order to achieve the best possible sharpness. Ves didn't doubt that she would definitely grow a tall and narrow tree once she advanced to Journeyman.

"Hm. Interesting."

Chapter 2289: Magnanimous Promise

Ves dreamt of different trees in the night before his fleet was ready to launch its attack.

His active imagination produced many different varieties of trees. Tall trees, short trees, wide trees, narrow trees, burnt trees, purple trees and more whipped past his vision.

What kind of tree did he want to grow?

How should he develop his design philosophy?

He truly wasn't sure.

It was easy for him to visualize the trees of other mech designers such as Ketis, Master Olson and Professor Ventag. Each of their design philosophies already put them on the path to growing a specific tree.

Yet Ves was still confused about the growth of his own one. It was not as if he lacked some solid goals. He just felt that multiple approaches were viable. Either of the two most common trees could become a good fit depending on how he wanted to develop his specialty.

When he woke up in the bed of his stateroom, he came no closer to resolving his doubts. This annoyed him quite a bit, even though Master Willix told him not to overthink this matter.

So far, he believed his development trajectory equated best to a short but wide tree. Though Ves felt a bit doubtful about growing a height-challenged tree, if this was how his specialty in the future, then it was best not to resist this trend.

"Who cares if my tree is short." He muttered under his breath. "The total volume of my tree is not any worse than a tall and narrow tree!"

He rose from his bed and followed his usual morning routine. His grooming bot took exceeding care in shaving off his stubble. Since today was the day that Task Force Predator launched its attack on Ulimo Citadel, Ves wanted to make sure he presented himself at his best!

After enjoying a brief breakfast, he strode to the bridge where Major Verle was already in the process of putting all of the pieces in place.

"Good morning, sir." Verle greeted him. "The Avatars, Sentinels, Battle Criers, Vandals and Swordmaidens are in the process of prepping and launching their mechs for battle. The Penitent Sisters are taking a little longer. The women have wasted too much time on their prayers this morning."

"Huh?"

"Apparently, they wish to gain the Superior Mother's blessing."

Ves chuckled at that. "The Superior Mother is asleep right now. They should try again later."

He sat down at the central seat that Major Verle vacated and watched the bridge officers make their final preparations.

The bridge of the Scarlet Rose was not exactly set up to direct a major battle involving thousands of mechs on both sides. Therefore, after a brief chat with Ves, Major Verle departed to the hangar bay in order to transfer to the much larger Redfeather.

Ves patiently tapped the armrest of his seat. Hundreds of mechs launched into space. More were on their way, though the 'bandwidth' of the carrier ships constrained their launch speed.

As far as the Black Cats were aware of, the Dry Snakes and their underlings were capable of fielding up to 4300 mechs, though their variability was great. The greatest source of uncertainty came from the newly-erected Ulimo Militia which gathered a number of previously-independent pirate outfits.

The Mirror Raiders had become a part of the Ulimo Militia as well. It was one of the major reasons why the Larkinson Clan gained greater access to the pirate stronghold's defenses.

As for the Task Force Predator, the Avatars, Sentinels, Battle Criers, Vandals and Swordmaidens were only able to muster around 1300 mechs.

Of course, this did not take into account the Penitent Sisters. They had suffered the fewest losses of any mech force so far. Their amazingly resilient mechs bullied every pirate mech they encountered due to their impenetrable defenses.

The only way for pirates to defeat their second-class mechs was to employ their superweapons!

This was why the Black Cats invested several weeks in undermining Ulimo Citadel's defenses.

A few minutes later, Calabast stopped by the bridge. Her black uniform caused a few people to turn their heads, though they quickly went back to their duties.

"Ves. The big day has come. Are you sure you want to proceed with this attack? Once you let your boys loose, you won't be able to go back."

"They aren't my boys. They are the soldiers of our clan. They fight on behalf of every Larkinson."

"Sure. Whatever you say, kid." Calabast crossed her arms. "Though we have managed to infiltrate many sections of Ulimo Citadel, not all of it is completely within our grasp. We cannot rule out the possibility that the pirates are still able to deploy weapons that are powerful enough to wipe out several of our mech companies at once."

Ves let out a deep breath. "I'm aware of the risks. I take responsibility for whatever consequence we suffer. I'm happy as long as we win this battle without losing the majority of our mech pilots."

In fact, even Task Force Predator lost 90 percent of its mech pilots, Ves could still live with the results!

He mainly wanted to preserve the expert candidates of his clan as well as some other key figures such as the Ingvar siblings and Dietrich.

As for everyone else, they were largely expendable in his eyes. Their lives and deaths only saddened him on a general basis. He doubted whether he would shed an actual tear.

The bigger reason why he wanted to avoid losing most of the lives of his clansmen was because he wanted to retain his standing in the clan.

It would become very hard to retain his position as clan patriarch if his decisions directly led to the deaths of more than a thousand Larkinsons!

Ves could easily imagine that more than 80 percent of the Larkinson Assembly would vote to strip him from his title!

Therefore, Ves was making a huge gamble right now.

Succeed, and his Larkinson Clan would be able to grow leaps and bounds after getting bloodied in a major battle.

Fail, and he would become subject to an incredible amount of condemnation. Regardless of how much money his design work generated for the clan, no amount of money was worth suffering such an immense amount of losses!

"This might be a good time to hold a speech." Calabast suggested. "While our mech pilots are already prepared to fight a tough and dangerous opponent, it helps to remind them what they are fighting for. We aren't an army defending our homes and family, you know. We are about to launch an unprovoked attack against strong and vicious pirates. While they doubtlessly deserve to get beaten, it's not our business to do the Big Two's dirty work."

She had a point. A speech might not make a big difference, but any improvement was welcome. If his Larkinsons fought a little bit harder, the pirates might collapse a bit earlier!

"Comms, please open a channel to every ship. I want to speak to every single Larkinson in the fleet."

It didn't take much time to set up the address. Thousands of projections of Ves appeared in front of the faces of every single Larkinson.

The clan patriarch, wearing his red-and-white patriarch uniform, had stood up from his seat and faced every Larkinson that was about to take part in the upcoming battle, whether directly or indirectly.

"Larkinsons." He began. "Today is the day we fight our most challenging battle to date. Think of who we fought to get here. Davy's Ghosts. The Rust Grinders. The Mountain Kings. The Crona Lords. All of these pirate groups and more have put up a fight against our clan, to no avail. Not even the powerful Allidus Alliance with their elite Allidus Archons managed to stop our rampage!"

Every Larkinson who listened to Ves felt proud at the mention of the defeated pirate groups. Task Force Predator did not disappoint its name! The Larkinsons eagerly hunted every pirate in their way.

Ves continued to speak.

"We have grown far beyond our initial battle against Davy's Ghosts. Do any of you still recall the disappointing performance of the rookies of the Living Sentinels? The leaderless mob of pirates almost managed to swarm our rookies to death!"

A lot of Larkinsons chuckled at the mention of this embarrassing event. If Ves spoke these words a month ago, he would have probably attracted a lot of animosity.

Not anymore. Even the rookie Sentinels joined in the laughter.

Each of them had grown immensely after learning that harsh lesson. They rookies quickly gained experience over the course of successive battles against pirates. Every other Larkinsons aside from the elite and battle-hardened veterans grew immensely over the course of just a couple of months.

If the Larkinson Clan went on this excursion, it would have taken years to come even close to reaching its current level of battle readiness!

In a way, Ves had already reached his goal of turning every Larkinson mech pilot into a bloodied soldier.

"Each of you has grown stronger. Our mechs may have remained the same, but our combat strength has soared! What makes us different from any other comparable organization is our willingness to fight!"

He raised his fist to emphasize his point!

"We are not cowards who shy away from battle as much as possible. Each of you have come with me to the Nyxian Gap, braving pirates and anomalies alike. Now, I ask you to prove your valor once more! Are you willing?!"

"YES!"

Thousands of Larkinsons roared their response! Voices echoed in the compartments and halls of every single Larkinson ship!

Ves grinned. "Good! I am proud to hear your eagerness to demolish the Nyxian pirates once again! Not only will we remove cancer from society, we will also be able to obtain an immense amount of plunder if we win! I promise you now that every single participant of this battle will be rewarded for their contributions. No matter the outcome of this battle, as long as we make it back, I promise to waive the cost of acquiring your first second-class gene mod template and implant! While it might take a lot of time to ensure that each of you will receive your augmentations, none of you will have to pay any hex credits or Larkinson merits to improve yourselves!"

If the earlier roar had shaken the ships, the ecstatic cries that erupted after he made his promise had metaphorically shaken the vessels to pieces!

No one despised this gift!

None of the Larkinsons wanted to refuse this golden offer!

To many of them, second-class implants were still out of their reach. It cost hundreds of Larkinson merits to obtain a decent set, and most clansmen needed at least a decade or two to accumulate the required merits!

To obtain them for free was an immensely generous gift that instantly supercharged the fighting spirit of every single Larkinson!

Ves unabashedly grinned. Forget about using empty words and platitudes to motivate his clansmen.

In his opinion, the best way to ensure they would do their best was to dangle an immensely juicy carrot in front of their faces!

Though he would certainly regret making this promise afterwards, he believed this investment was ultimately worth it. By empowering the participants of this excursion, the clan directly strengthened the capabilities of its most courageous and battle eager Larkinsons!

In the medium and long term, the braver Larkinsons would gain more prominence over the more cautious and risk-averse clansmen. This ensured that the people who were more aligned to his ideology eventually dominated the middle and upper levels of the Larkinson Clan in the future!

His expensive promise also sent out a signal to the entire clan that taking risks and enduring hardships would always be rewarded. A proper Larkinson should be proactive rather than reactive.

"Now prepare to fight, my Larkinsons! Fight for your clan! Fight for your fellow Larkinsons! Fight for yourself, because each and every one of you will achieve greatness! This is my promise!"

Chapter 2290: The Battle of Ulimo Citadel

Almost two-thousand mechs advanced towards the outer perimeter of Ulimo Citadel.

The Larkinson Clan did not hide their approach. The energy signatures of so many spaceborn mechs advancing at once could not be hidden. Though the asteroids and complicated environment of Maynard Fields helped cover up their emissions, it wouldn't be long before the Dry Snakes and its subordinate groups discovered that something was amiss!

Still, no alarms began to ring as the Larkinson mechs flew closer and closer.

In order to mitigate the potential losses stemming from getting attacked by a nuclear mine or other destructive area weapon, the Larkinson Clan opted to utilize dispersed formations this time.

While that made it difficult for the mechs to support each other, there was no serious downside as long as the pirate mechs did not come close.

The last thing Ves and the Larkinsons wanted to see was a powerful detonation annihilating several mech companies at once!

Therefore, the various mech forces approaching the outer defenses of Ulimo Citadel resembled a swarm.

Initially, the swarm moved forth in unison, but at a certain point, it began to split up. Several splinters diverged from each other and headed towards specific coordinates.

What was even stranger was that a small transport and a number of shuttles tagged along these splinters as well. The units that had received special orders did not entirely consist of mechs!

Commander Orfan piloted a spearman mech and led one of these units. Hundreds of mechs of the Flagrant Vandals and other forces obeyed her orders, though so far she merely followed a prescribed plan.

None of her usual levity could be seen from her today. Attacking Ulimo Citadel was a difficult endeavor that relied on many events to go right. The clan drafted an elaborate, multi-step plan to dismantle the threats of Ulimo Citadel and the pirates who reigned over it. If even a single step didn't go as planned, hundreds of Larkinsons might die!

Such responsibility weighed heavily on her. In fact, she harbored quite a lot of misgivings about this operation.

It was one thing to smash some regular pirates.

It was another thing to attack pirates who possessed enough superweapons to wipe out entire cities at once!

None of the mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan felt safe in their fragile machines. As the clan continued to prosper, more and more mech pilots felt as if their cheap, low-specced machines were no longer suitable to them. They deserved to pilot better, especially when they heard that the LMC earned more than a trillion hex credits in the past couple of months!

Sadly, the timing wasn't right and many mech pilots still needed time to obtain the right qualifications.

Only the expert candidates and the Avatars assigned to the Bright Warriors possessed a little bit more confidence.

The iconic mech of the Larkinson Clan may just be a bridge mech, but its defense was superb! It might just be possible for the mechs to survive getting hit by a weaker superweapon!

That said, the clan only outfitted a couple of Avatar mech companies with Bright Warriors. The Commander Orfan and her Flagrant Vandals only had to make do with their old lastgen military mech models.

"I have to get ahold of Ves or Major Verle and tell them to replace our old mechs as soon as possible!"

With the growing wealth of the Larkinson Clan, even Orfan could see that fielding third-class mechs became less relevant over time.

Attracted by the power and majesty of second-class mechs, every mech pilot who joined the clan urgently trained to obtain the qualifications to pilot these powerful machines!

Their need became even greater once they entered the Nyxian Gap. The casualties they suffered could have been reduced if they piloted better mechs!

Therefore, almost every Larkinson mech pilot trained or studied earnestly whenever they were awake. They craved fighting actual battles and pirates because they improved by leaps and bounds. Each time they fought a serious battle, they discovered their shortcomings. They were also able to validate their newly-acquired skills and polish them even further in the furnace of battle.

Commander Orfan was fairly proud of her Vandals. Even though they consisted of average Brighter military mech pilots, their discipline and training was superior to most of the mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan.

Hopefully, her new bosses would recognize their strength and provide them with new machines once they returned to civilized space. If not, she was more than willing to raise hell to stand up for the interests of her fellow Vandals!

"Commander, we're approaching our target." A Vandal mech captain spoke. "The vault we are heading towards is currently guarded by around three mech companies, of which two are on standby. We expect their long-ranged sensors to detect us within five minutes. As for the vault defenses... hehe, if the Black Cats have done their job, we can easily take their vault!"

"What forces are we up against?"

"So far, two of the mech companies are from the Dry Snakes. The third one appears to be from Farmund's Own."

"Understood."

Commander Orfan did not ask about the fixed defenses of the vault. Even though the pirates built enough turrets and other protective measures to resist or stall the advance of hundreds of mechs, none of the pirates knew that those base defenses were completely compromised!

While it was challenging for the Black Cats to sabotage the core defensive systems of Ulimo Citadel, the vaults that held a lot of destructive weapons were different.

Grand Protector Roshaw, the pirate lord that reigned over Ulimo, personally ordered the construction of these outlying vaults to remove the risk of Ulimo getting blown up by nefarious actors.

The upside was this measure did as advertised. Even if a couple of nuclear bombs exploded, the only loss the pirates suffered was a lot of superweapons. The Dry Snakes were more than willing to compensate for any losses suffered by their customers.

The downside was that it was a cumbersome chore to protect these outer positions!

The necessity to place them far away from the Citadel meant that it was difficult to guard them around the clock!

In ordinary times, only a single mech company guarded every vault. With the formidable array of base defenses, any enemy that wanted to mess with a vault would face stiff resistance, thereby buying time for the main garrison to dispatch a relief force from the main pirate stronghold.

Ever since the Dry Snakes smelled trouble, they tripled the garrisons of the vaults. This provided the pirates with even greater guarantees. They also dispatched numerous more technicians and specialists to keep an extra close eye on their defense systems.

Yet no matter how much the pirates wanted to cover all of their vaults, they couldn't afford to spread their forces so thin!

In addition, the pirates themselves may be frightened by the threat of the Larkinson Clan, but they were not very disciplined and difficult to control!

Hardly any pirate could maintain their focus and remain alert for several weeks. Many of the pirates began to grow lazy and sloppy, and they no longer strictly adhered to protocol.

For these reasons, the mech companies garrisoned at the vaults adopted a simple three-shift rotation. Every eight standard hours, a different mech company deployed into space.

As for the rest? They either slept or had some fun!

This was why by the time the defenders of one of the vaults noticed the approach of Commander Orfan's detachment, no other mechs deployed from the hangar built next to the vault!

"Storm the vault! Don't let the pirates mess with the goods!"

More than a hundred charged forward while some other mechs followed at a slower pace.

The mechs that moved on ahead consisted entirely of melee mechs. The sight of so many eager mechs charging forward caused the currently-deployed pirates to quiver.

Their forty pirate mechs would never be able to block so many enemies!

"Wake up the other boys!" A pirate officer cried, panic suffusing his stimulant-addled body! "What the heck are our turrets doing? Shoot them already! Why aren't our missile banks firing any volleys? What has happened to our Judgement Lasers?"

In recent months, the Allidus Alliance supplied Ulimo Citadel with a batch of powerful warship-grade laser cannons. The Dry Snakes opted to mount the Judgement Lasers on a couple of ships while installing the rest at their various vaults.

The firepower of these Judgement Lasers should have been enough to blunt the enemy advance!

It wasn't the fault of the operators. Instructed by their superiors, they frequently inspected their weapon systems. They performed diagnostics at least several times a day and even test-fired their weapons if it wasn't too costly.

So far, every single weapon and superweapon worked as advertised.

Yet as soon as the operators wanted to bring their weapon systems to bear against the approaching Larkinsons, their systems suddenly shut down entirely!

"We've been hacked!"

"Switch to backup systems!"

"It's not working! Our backups have been hacked as well!"

"Damnit! Why didn't we find out sooner?!"

The pirates discovered to their horror that the tampering was more devious than they thought!

It wasn't actually difficult to disable the key systems of a weapon system. What was truly challenging was to tamper with them in a way to keep them functional until the key moment arrived. All the while, the tampering had to remain hidden, lest the pirates find out and fix the issue!

"Switch to emergency manual operation! I don't care if we have to eyeball our aim, just get our weapons firing as soon as possible!"

As more and more operators began to bypass the compromised electronic systems of their weapon platforms, a hidden command suddenly activated.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Various defensive systems blew up and became engulfed by explosions as systems overloaded, explosive ordnance detonated in their racks and smaller precision explosives wrecked a lot of key systems!

Hundreds of average pirate operators were swept away by the destructive fury. The few who survived were stunned by what had happened and completely lost their nerves!

Over eighty percent of the vault defenses succumbed to sabotage! The few laser turrets that began to attack the incoming Larkinson mechs soon attracted a heavy response from the attackers!

Upon Commander Orfan's command, her ranged mechs fired all of their guns at the surviving base defenses.

Though they were protected by a large amount of Kavenit-based armor, the fact that they were completely stationary made it easy for the Larkinsons to concentrate their fire!

The ranged mechs of the Larkinson Clan all linked their firing systems together. Through automating their aim, the ranged mechs all fired their weapons at very specific targets with pinpoint accuracy.

Such an extreme degree of concentration of fire meant that much of the armor protecting the defensive systems hardly played a role. With hundreds of laser beams and physical projectiles brought to bear at the same target, a lot of holes were rapidly being drilled in quick succession!

At this time, the melee mechs also ran over the active pirate mechs. Dry Snakes or not, their admittedly decent mechs simply couldn't withstand more than a hundred well-trained Larkinson mech pilots paired with higher-quality mechs.

"Additional enemy mechs are sorting from the hangar bay!"

"You know what to do. Stop them before they all manage to deploy!" Commander Orfan barked.

A few squads of Vandal mechs intercepted the new arrivals while some cannoneer mechs brought their ballistic cannons to bear at the hangar bay.

The cannoneer mechs fired their large guns, propelling specially-prepared explosive shells at their targets!

The weak energy screen that protected the opening succumbed after a single impact. Subsequent shells flew straight through and exploded in the large interior!

Numerous mech technicians and mech pilots in the open died with each explosion! The cannoneer mechs did not relent and continued to fire into the hangar, spreading death and destruction to such a powerful extent that no more pirate mechs launched into space!

With the mechs and base defenses of the vault taken out, Commander Orfan sighed in relief. Fortunately, none of the big weapons ever had a chance to fire.

"Commander, our sensors are detecting massed pirate mechs approaching our position! ETA four minutes!"

"Reform our mechs and stall them as best as possible. Tell me if additional pirates are on the way."

Now that the Larkinsons neutralized most of the pirate defenders, the shuttles and transports began to approach the vault. Armored infantry exited the shuttles and began to sweep up the panicked and demoralized pirates inside the vault complex!

Meanwhile, a well-protected team of engineers and weapon operators emerged from the transports. A number of bots also began to unload some heavy hardware such as power generators.

Their goal was clear. The Larkinsons wanted to breach the vault and take over as many superweapons as possible in order to use them against their former owners!

"What a crazy plan!" Orfan uttered.