

## Mech 2331

### *Chapter 2331: Finding A Direction*

Visiting the Redfeather in order to observe the Shield of Samar up close bore fruit. Ves not only learned how it expressed its individuality, but also developed a strong guess how it came about!

At the heart of it, the Shield of Samar grew alongside its mech pilot. The mech experienced Jannzi's every victory or loss, every boring patrol and every live practice session.

Each time they bonded together, Jannzi gained something from her mech. At the same time, the Shield of Samar gained something from its mech pilot.

Ves believed that this exchange was a slow and gradual process in ordinary cases.

The spiritual foundation of his products started off weak. Giving too much of it away to the mech pilot risked damaging its root!

Normal mech pilots also couldn't give too much of themselves away. The spirituality of the majority of mech pilots was so small that they were almost invisible in his spiritual vision!

Only those with spiritual potential were able to donate more, but what they could contribute was very paltry compared to expert candidates and expert pilots.

In fact, now that Jannzi advanced to expert pilot, her force of will had grown by leaps and bounds!

Not only that, but as long as she continued to grow, her resonance strength and other spiritual parameters would likely grow exponentially stronger!

If she could only feed the Shield of Samar with a single biscuit with every piloting session when she was an expert candidate, now she was capable of serving an entire meal!

In the future, this would become even more exaggerated. Perhaps she was capable of feeding an entire container's worth of food when she reached the limit of an expert pilot!

"The problem is that her case is an exception. Most of my mech pilots don't have any hope of becoming expert candidates or expert pilots!"

Ves returned to his stateroom. He didn't look much better than Lucky, who was still splayed on his table while slowly waiting for his mechanical body to recover.

"Meoow..."

Now that he thought about it, Lucky might have absorbed some life as well. According to Ketis, the gem cat bit the statue of the Unending One when it was actively releasing darkness.

Perhaps one of the reasons why Lucky's spirituality felt so weak was because it was having trouble 'digesting' the darkness he inadvertently absorbed!

Ves sharpened his eyes as he observed his cat for signs of abnormality. However, aside from intensifying the definition of his black tiger stripes, Lucky hardly looked any different.

There weren't any signs of contamination. Ves closely probed Lucky's spirituality, much to the cat's annoyance, and found no remnant influence or parasitic existence.

Of course, Ves wasn't arrogant enough to believe he was able to detect any signs of impropriety, but he intuitively knew that Lucky remained pure.

Lucky ate exotics all the time. His ability to phase wasn't his greatest strength. Aside from his ability to produce gems, Ves most admired his absorption ability.

He became whatever he ate!

Yet the downside of this was that it cost a lot of valuable resources to keep Lucky sated. Whatever entered his stomach disappeared from reality.

"It's a zero-sum game."

Adding something meant removing something else. Ves couldn't cheat this process. Either he gave up some valuable exotics, or he kept Lucky deprived of his food. There was no way he could avoid both outcomes at the same time.

"The same should apply to growing mechs."

Growth was a costly transformation.

Babies needed care and nutrition in order to grow up into healthy adults.

Seeds required soil and a source of energy to grow into vigorous plants.

Ves had to expend a lot of materials to build a mech.

In short, almost every process in reality consisted of some sort of exchange.

The same should apply to life.

To grow the life of a mech, a price needed to be paid.

So far, Ves couldn't think of anything a mech pilot could pay except for his own presence and the life he bore in his mind.

The man-machine connection forged a convenient channel to facilitate this transaction. Yet the reason why most LMC mechs weren't able to grow that much was because most mech pilots were too weak!

Certainly, it was not as if they were completely incapable. Ves sensed at least some progress in every LMC mech in the Larkinson Clan. It was just that the rate of progress was too slow.

Only Venerable Jannzi and the expert candidates jumped out of this pattern. Their stronger force of wills provided much more 'nutrition' to their mechs.

"If this is true, then individuality is basically a luxury. Only stronger mech pilots are able to develop their mechs!"

This was not what Ves wanted!

Sure, it was definitely good if high-ranking mech pilots gained significantly more from his mechs. Ves did not object to the advantages they gained due to the merit of their strength.

Yet Ves was not like Gloriana, who would likely be content with designing expert mechs for the rest of her life.

While he hadn't explicitly thought about it, Ves wanted his products to be available to everyone. It was fine if expert pilots gained more out of his products. What Ves didn't enjoy was if the main benefit of piloting his mechs was largely deprived from his general audience!

Some mech designers believed that they benefited the most if they designed the strongest mechs. These passionate people were readily willing to give up on providing mechs to the masses.

Such an outcome did not sit well with Ves. While he didn't develop an obsession to push his mechs onto every mech pilot in existence, he still wanted to offer those who were willing an opportunity to grow alongside a living mech.

Ves could forget about progressing his mech designer if he didn't solve this problem.

"How can I facilitate the growth of a mech when their mech pilots don't have much to offer?"

He scratched his head. "Maybe both of them have to work together. As long as they achieve greater synergy, perhaps a remarkable transformation can take place."

He developed a few preliminary ideas how he could accomplish this. The problem was that he wasn't sure about any of them without testing them for real.

"This is risky, though."

Unlike most of his spiritual experiments, his latest ideas involved both mechs and mech pilots in combination. How could he create a method to accelerate the individual growth of his mechs if he didn't test it out with actual mechs?

Not just any mech would do. Ves had to conduct his experiments with LMC mechs. This was very troublesome.

"Do I have any other choice than pairing up my test subjects with my products?"

The Battle of Ulimo Citadel delivered a lot of fresh test subjects to his holding cells. At least several of them were surviving mech pilots. Each of them possessed spiritual potential, but due to their chaotic lifestyles they were no close to advancing to expert candidates.

Regardless, their spiritual potential provided them with a greater degree of tolerance towards losses than other mech pilots.

This was good. It meant the chance his experiments killed his mech pilots was low. Yet Ves still had to test his experiments on mech pilots without spiritual potential as well.

Ves frowned a bit. Every pirate captive the Larkinsons picked up so far consisted entirely of people with spiritual potential.

Those who didn't possess this quality were deemed useless! The Larkinsons outright executed the hardened pirates. Those who were innocents were spared from this fate. The clan merely left them behind at Ulimo and told them to do whatever they wanted.

It didn't matter. In time, some other powerful pirate group would come to the half-broken pirate base and rebuild it anew.

"I should have grabbed some of them on the way out!"

Perhaps the Larkinson Clan would be lucky enough to stumble on a weak pirate outfit along the way out. If that happened, Ves could easily get his hands on some suitable test subjects.

In the meantime, Ves spent a few hours on theorizing. He wanted to flesh out every idea as much as possible before he resorted to actual experiments.

"I need to make some progress quickly. The Chiron and many of my other ongoing design projects can benefit from this innovation."

Individuality, not uniformity, was the key to progressing his mech design. Ves had already noticed that his design seed had become more active than ever during the last few hours.

Ves believed he was on the right track!

As long as he discovered the right method and developed it further, he believed that he could make it all the way to Senior. It might take a couple of decades, but once his mechs started to develop their own individual characters after days of use, then glows should no longer be the primary selling points of his mechs!

"Wait. I forgot about the third player in the game!"

Glows! Glows came from design spirits, which were very powerful spiritual entities!

Their power was immense. They constantly grew stronger due to the sheer volume of spiritual feedback they derived from mech pilots.

His most popular model, the Desolate Soldier, was being piloted by millions of mech pilots spread throughout the Komodo Star Sector and beyond!

However, not all of it was useful. When Ves inspected the state of the Solemn Guardian, he already noted that the design spirit was already saturated with spiritual energy.

Even if tens of millions of mech pilots were added to the equation, the Solemn Guardian didn't actually benefit.

The spiritual feedback that all of those ordinary mech pilots provided was too low in quality!

The Solemn Guardian was flooded with so much low-quality spiritual feedback that the design spirit was forced to discard most of it! It was like pouring water into a mug.

At some point, pouring additional water merely caused the liquid to spill over.

"Where does all of that excess water go?"

Basically, all of it went away! This was a pretty egregious waste of spiritual energy. Even if it was very heterogeneous, it was still a resource that could be spent!

What if Ves took this excess spiritual energy and instead fed it to the spiritual foundation of his mechs?

It would have gone to waste otherwise!

Though the spiritual feedback of a single mech pilot was miniscule, combining them all together resulted in a very considerable quantity.

Of course, it wasn't easy to accomplish his desired outcome. All of that mixed spiritual energy was very diverse and mixed with a lot of junk. Recklessly feeding them into a mech would probably warp the mechs.

This was where his design spirit came in. Directly feeding the spiritual junk from millions of mech pilots into a specific was wrong. It needed to be processed, and what better way to do so than through the design spirit?

Ves glanced at Lucky.

In a way, weren't design spirits similar to Lucky?

They ate all kinds of junk, and produced remarkably uniform output in return!

What Ves had to do was to establish a spiritual mechanism where the output of his design spirit was being put back into mechs!

He suddenly halted. "There's a problem with this method."

Feeding a mech with the spiritual energy of its own design spirit would only reinforce its uniformity. How could the mech pilot possibly develop a closer relation with his mech if it continued to align itself to its design spirit?

Ves needed to add another process!

He began to develop a headache as he tried to figure out a way to solve this new problem. He felt as if he needed to do more and more spiritual engineering to come up with increasingly more sophisticated solutions.

Despite these difficulties, Ves began to grin!

"At least I have found my direction! This is better than getting lost!"

*Chapter 2332: Legacy Mechs*

New theories and ideas flowed into his mind. Ves faced a very challenging problem, and it took the utmost of his creativity and problem-solving skills to derive a viable solution.

His goal sounded simple. He wanted to increase the individual expression of his mechs.

Right now, it took either years of constant use or complete dedication for any mech pilot to mold a specific mech in a unique direction.

Individuality in mechs was rather subtle in the first place. Unless someone could match Jannzi's extreme devotion, the difference it could make in battle was rather marginal.

His ambition didn't really sound that impressive to be honest. Certainly, making a mech more responsive to the mech pilot sounded like a noble goal. However, a competing mech with twenty percent higher firepower could easily beat the inferior mech despite its excellent compatibility with its mech pilot!

The advantage of a mech that maximized performance was that they delivered a predictable level of performance to every mech pilot. In other words, a well-maintained standard mech wouldn't exhibit remarkably better or remarkably worse performance.

This was less so with his own products. Living mechs that possessed the capacity to love or hate their own mech pilots could influence its effective performance by adjusting their fit to their mech pilots.

In other words, by unlocking the capacity for mechs to judge their own mech pilots, Ves introduced a new variable that his customers needed to take into account.

This was not always good. As someone who presided over a thousand mechs himself, he knew that leaders such as him wanted his mechs to be as uniform as possible.

At this scale, mechs that performed unexpectedly worse or better threw off his calculations.

Certainly, if a mech performed better than usual, Ves would welcome this outcome. However, the nature of his design philosophy meant that his mechs could accept as well as reject their mech pilots.

If the latter occurred, then that was quite an unpleasant surprise!

As long as the mech buyer bought the most suitable LMC mech for a mech pilot, then the chances of rejection should be low. However, would every mech buyer be as attentive? What if funding and opportunity constraints prevented a buyer to perform proper matching between mechs and mech pilots?

"There is also the imprinting issue."

What happened when mechs that molded themselves to specific mech pilots received different users?

Would the individuality of a mech prompt it to reject mech pilots they weren't accustomed to accommodating?

That would be quite bad! A mech that had developed an individual character that effectively performed twenty or thirty percent worse was a disaster in an actual battle!

The desirability, practicality and longevity of his products would definitely drop if this became a reality!

However, mechs didn't necessarily have to develop in this fashion. What if he designed the individuality of mechs with successive users in mind from the very start?

As long as he configured the spiritual foundation of his mechs correctly, then they ought to be able to adjust to the next user.

"Perhaps this can even be touted as a benefit rather than a burden!"

The most fitting word that encapsulated this concept was 'legacy'.

Ves wasn't entirely unfamiliar with this concept. Inspired by natural spiritual entities such as Qilanxo, he designed all of his spiritual products with legacy in mind.

In fact, it was even a core feature for his two ancestral spirits! Both the Golden Cat and the Superior Mother were explicitly designed to come into greater power as they grew older. The wisdom and strength they derived from generations of Larkinsons and Hexers constantly allowed them to develop across generations.

Goldie would likely become a completely different spiritual entity a century from now! At that time, she might rival or exceed Qilanxo's current level of strength!

If his mechs developed in a similar fashion, then as they grew older, they would actually be able accrue value over time!

This was different from many other consumer mechs. As technology advanced and tactics evolved, older mechs became increasingly more irrelevant. Their technological constraints caused their performance to lag more and more in relation to more modern mechs.

"What if this is not the case anymore? What if my mechs are able to develop a unique quality over time? What if this quality is so valuable and unable to be replicated in any other way that plenty of people would love to use them on an ongoing basis?"

Such a mech would transcend the definition of commodity! A living, growing mech like this would cease to become interchangeable with comparable mechs.

Even if two living mechs were derived from the same design, fabricated from the same manufacturing complex and worked on by the same crew in the same week, they could become completely different beasts after several years of active use on the battlefield!



His passion for this new category of mechs flared up as his imagination went wild with this idea. His design seed loved the concept of legacy mechs.

"It's not enough to design living mechs. I have to make them desirable to their users in order to ensure they are properly cared for. Older mechs shouldn't be discarded like trash!"

Ves fully embraced this new concept! If possible, he wanted to turn this into one of the main characteristics of most of his mech designs from this point onwards.

Aside from mechs which demanded a high degree of uniformity or temporary mechs such as those designed for single duels, adding the possibility for mechs to grow richer in character would definitely bring him closer to bringing his ambition into fruition!

The whole point about designing living mechs was to make them more valued. Certainly, he hadn't forgotten that they were meant to be used in battle. They would always remain at least somewhat expendable.

That did not mean that his mechs should be treated as trash. Just like how he treated his own clansmen, those who were alive needed to be nurtured and properly taken care of. How else would he be able to send them off to fight a difficult opponent when it truly mattered?

Though there was an inherent contradiction between these two desires, but Ves was used to holding conflicting thoughts. Ves did not seek an absolute with regards to his products. It was fine if their owners valued them as much as their children, but he wouldn't shed a tear if their owners subsequently lost a bunch of LMC mechs in a difficult battle.

Every mech was built for combat. The nature of combat always entailed the prospect of suffering undesirable losses. Any mech designer who couldn't bear the thought of their products suffering ignoble ends weren't suitable for the profession!

His hands twitched. He ached to put his ideas in reality.

Now that Task Force Predator had left Ulimo Citadel and was slowly making its way out of the periphery of the Nyxian Gap, there should be plenty of time for him to develop a means to turn this fantastic concept into reality.

He returned to one of his earlier ideas. To develop the character of a mech, it needed to grow. To do so, the mech needed to be fed with a sufficient amount of spiritual nutrients.

A newly-produced LMC mech and an ordinary mech pilot did not possess much spiritual strength. Neither of the two were able to supply the spirituality needed to develop the character of the mech.

At best, an ordinary mech pilot was just able to keep his mech alive on a starvation diet!

Therefore, the only chance to feed the mech with the spiritual energy required to grow at a rate comparable to the evolution of the Shield of Samar was to tap another source.

This was where his design spirits came in. Most of them possessed too much spiritual energy and weren't able to make effective use of their excess. Instead of throwing their junk away, why not channel it to the hungry little mechs they watched over? One spirit's trash was another mech's treasure!

Ves called up the Chiron design on his desk terminal and studied it for a time.

As a minor design project, his assistants contributed the most to the training mech design. Due to its technical complexity, Gloriana still made sure to solve every difficult problem or give the assistants enough direction for them to come up with solutions themselves.

The entire mech design had already reached a fairly advanced stage. It only needed a month of refinement before it reached the prototype testing phase.

"The entire mech is infused with the essence of adaptability and development." He remarked as he studied the mech from a spiritual angle.

Though much of it was due to his deliberate manipulation, the efforts of Gloriana and the design teams assigned to develop the Chiron all added up as well. Each of them constantly thought about increasing the Chiron's fit to the young Larkinson mech cadets who were destined to pilot it in the future.

As he studied the Chiron design further, he suddenly realized a big issue.

Its current designated design spirit was the Golden Cat.

Since the Chiron was exclusive to the Larkinsons, this was a fitting choice. Ves hoped that every young mech cadet who piloted the Chiron would grow up into a skilled mech pilot that completely dedicated his or her life to the Larkinson Clan!

It helped that the Larkinsons explicitly specialized in piloting mechs. Goldie may not be able to match the likes of the Solemn Guardian in terms of quantity of bonds, but every mech pilot connected to her was much more skilled than average.

Over time, the mech pilots connected to Goldie should also develop a distinctive piloting style unique to the Larkinson Clan.

All of this meant that the Chiron under Goldie taught mech cadets how to pilot a mech the Larkinson way instead of the standard way.

The problem that Ves faced at the moment was that Goldie hadn't reached saturation yet. She was only connected to a modest amount of people compared to his other design spirits. She also had plenty of room to grow. Taking away her spiritual energy at this stage would only slow down her growth.

"Hmm, is that true, though?"

Ves didn't necessarily assume that compelling Goldie to expend her energy would affect her growth. It might be that such an exertion might 'exercise' her instead.

Right now, he lacked too much information. The only way to see what would happen was to implement it in reality, and to do that he needed to conduct some tests with some expendable mech pilots.

Knowing that time was of the essence, Ves began to draw up a quick experiment in his mind to test his ideas.

"I should use an existing mech instead of an incomplete one." He muttered.

The Chiron may have developed to an advanced stage, but it was far from ready to be fielded, especially outside of lab conditions.

He needed to perform his experiments on a different mech. It should be a mature design and one that wasn't too strong.

"The Desolate Soldier fits."

His fleet had plenty of them lying around. Even if they were fairly weak, their glows were still useful in motivating the mech forces that didn't possess the Bright Warrior. The Living Sentinels were especially fans of the classic.

Ves ordered the Living Sentinels to transfer a spare Desolate Soldier mech to the Scarlet Rose's hangar bay.

He wasn't ready to implement his experiments on the entire mech design. That would have been reckless to the extreme.

"I only need to try it out on a single mech first, just to see if my direction is viable."

His current goal was to try and find a way to transform a cheap and fairly disposable Desolate Soldier mech into something greater!

As long as he could do it with a cheap mech, he could do it with a more expensive mech.

Ves raised his fist. "In the future, all of my mechs will turn into legacy mechs!"

### *Chapter 2333: Vacation Planning*

When Ves entered the design lab, he immediately sensed the subdued mood among his mech designers.

After asking a few questions, he quickly found out why his Braves weren't so cheerful at the moment.

The design lab sat adjacent to the mech workshop. Normally, that wasn't much of a problem, but this time was different!

Ves recalled that he ordered the statue of the Unending One to be moved in the workshop. Even though the statue was completely inert, every assistant had taken a look at it and regretted their decision!

The frightfully life-like depiction of the tentacled whale caused everyone to recall the terror they felt at the appearance of the giant avatar of the dark god. Though the Black Cats made sure that none of the footage of the Battle of Ulimo Citadel at that stage survived, the memories still lived on. Glimpsing the unnerving black alloy statue was enough to trigger people's trauma!

As Ves stepped inside the mech workshop, he didn't really see what the fuss was all about. Certainly, the supposed dark god did look very intimidating, but to Ves it was merely a very powerful spirit that somehow managed to survive the death of its own species and the passage of time.

He walked up to its base and kicked the metal surface.

No divine punishment rained down on his head. He sneered.

"You're nothing but a broken statue. Whatever magic you possessed is gone. If my Braves are so afraid of you, then I'll just keep you here until my subordinates finally get over their fears."

If there was one benefit to the Battle of Ulimo Citadel, it was that Ves learned that more spiritual threats existed than he anticipated. The Five Scrolls Compact definitely loomed the largest, but the existence of these supposed dark gods opened his eyes from threats that originated outside humanity.

The galaxy was more complicated than he thought. In the distant past and long before humans evolved to create fire, many sentient alien races already roamed the stars.

The ubiquity of communication crystals among several alien races hinted that these aliens were all acquainted with each other. Perhaps the luminar race possessed the same tech base as whatever forsaken alien race the Unending One belonged to. They

just used the same base technologies and designed them according to their individual needs.

For example, the Tzianti Crystals that Ves once used in the frontier should have been created by a normally-sized alien race. The new Xona Crystals that the Larkinson Clan looted from Ulimo Citadel ought to be the inventions of bigger alien races!

The luminar race definitely should have developed their own communication crystals as well. Theirs were probably small in order to accommodate the diminutive sizes of their users.

Since Ves lacked the equipment to process Unending alloy, he left the statue alone. There was no point in trying to melt it down or reshape the metal into something else such as a personal suit of armor.

While he deeply wanted to increase his personal protection, he really couldn't do anything if the only way to break the statue was by resorting to Lucky's special teeth!

A few days passed as Ves handled various design responsibilities at the time. Though he made sure to spend at least some hours on tinkering the Desolate Soldier mech that had been brought to the Scarlet Rose, He also had to work on his other design projects as well!

Ves grimaced a bit. The Battle of Ulimo Citadel and its aftermath distracted him for an entire week. During this time, he simply wasn't able to spend a sufficient amount of time on progressing his design projects, and it showed.

It didn't take much to see that Gloriana was quite annoyed with his absence. Without his help, their major design projects hadn't progressed as much as she wished. Both projects were running behind schedule!

During a joint design session, Ves sat together with Gloriana's physical projection as they observed the Valkyrie Redeemer design.

Though the mech still needed plenty of refinement, the overall direction of the mech had already been set. Ves was pleased with how the mech was geared towards channeling a suppressive glow to a target that was kilometers away. With his expanded spiritual understanding, he became even more confident that the Hexer mech would soon become known as a fearsome raider in the Komodo War!

While Ves wanted to implement the legacy mech concept to the Valkyrie Redeemer, this Hexer mech was arguably the one that least needed it out of all of his current projects.

In a high-intensity war where both sides sought immediate results, it didn't make that much sense to deliver mechs that still needed at least a year of regular use to come into power.

Additionally, the military reassigned its mech pilots to different machines fairly frequently, especially in wartime! Mechs fell all the time, and his Blessed Squires doubtlessly got destroyed by the thousands at this time.

In such a grueling conflict, the allure of legacy mechs paled in comparison to the strong and distinctive glows that imposed unmatched uniformity among many mech pilots.

Mechs used in wars also evolved frequently. The enemy constantly tried to counter successful mech models. In some cases, it made sense to drop ineffective mech models in favor of newer ones that weren't countered yet. Forcing soldiers to pilot outdated or easily-exploitable mechs was not a good way to win a massive war, especially when both sides were still flush with money and resources.

Ves knew that it wouldn't be good for his Hexer mech designs if the Komodo War dragged on for more than five years. This was a very long period of time that would doubtlessly evoke rapid evolution of all of the mechs used in the fighting.

Instead of spending time on designing new mechs, Ves and Gloriana would instead be compelled to spend at least some of their design time on updating the Blessed Squire, Valkyrie Redeemer and other existing mech models.

Even if he could pass at least some of this work to his assistants, it was still an unwanted burden.

The Komodo War had to end quickly! The best way for Ves to help the Hexers crush the Fridaymen was to make sure to supply mechs with strong glows to the Hex Army.

For this reason, Ves and Gloriana decided to allocate most of their available design time to completing the Valkyrie Redeemer.

Both decided to pause the Cat's Paw Project. While the heavy artillery mech was still important, its priority wasn't as high. Their factory ship wasn't ready to be delivered in around half a year. The clan's existing spaceborn mechs already offered sufficient protection.

"I'm so happy." Gloriana sighed contently as her physical projection leaned against his shoulder. "I missed this so much. Designing mechs isn't the same without you. When will you return?"

"Less than two months if there aren't any pirates in our task force's way. We're not looking for any confrontations anymore so we shouldn't be pulled in too many fights. We

still have plenty of mechs to deter almost every pirate group in Maynard Fields and Wreckage Paradise."

Ves took a deep breath, smelling his fiancé flowery scent.

He had become used to the wonders of physical projection technology. The simulation of reality was so realistic that Ves was easily able to ignore the fact that Gloriana wasn't physically present at the moment.

"Ves?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Do you really intend to travel to Majestic Teal Star Sector once we are ready to leave the Komodo Star Sector?"

He nodded. "We need to make our way to the nearest beyonder gate. That will take a few years of travel. Along the way, we have to keep earning merits."

"There is plenty of work available in Vicious Mountain."

"That's true, but I have additional reasons to travel to Majestic Teal. Visiting the Life Research Association allows us to fulfill three objectives. First, many scientists in the LRA are obsessed with the study of life. Debating and exchanging knowledge with them will definitely allow me to progress my design philosophy. This is what I need, Gloriana."

"I understand." She replied. "I would pursue this opportunity as well if I were in your shoes."

"Aside from that, we need to hire a lot of excellent doctors, geneticists, implant surgeons, exobiologists and other biotech experts."

"We have already adopted plenty of talents in our clan. I haven't remained idle back on Cinach VI."

Ves shook his head. "That's different. All of them are third-class professionals. That won't cut it, especially since I've promised to provide every participant of this excursion a free set of implants and gene mod templates."

Delivering this promise was a huge burden. Third-class professionals weren't qualified to work with second-class augments. Aside from spending a lot of time and effort in raising their competences, it was much more convenient to hire professionals who were ready to work with advanced solutions right away.

In other words, he needed more people like Ranya Wodin.



"Okay, I'll give you that." She spoke. "It's not easy to acquire these skilled professionals. Now that the Komodo War has entered full swing, most of the people that I could have hired for you are preoccupied with assisting in the war effort."

That was a good thing in his eyes! The less Hexers in the clan, the better! As far as he was concerned, Gloriana had quietly given up her attempts to push her fellow Hexers into the clan. The culture and ideals of the Larkinsons explicitly emphasized equality, which was something that Hexer ideology fundamentally opposed!

"What's the third reason for traveling to the LRA?"

"I already told you that. The pirates that helped us conquer Ulimo Citadel want to be reunited with their families. I've graciously cleared their names, so they shouldn't be wanted by the authorities anymore."

"I don't think this reunion will go as smoothly as you think." She pressed her finger against his chest. "You only managed to convince the MTA to stop treating them as outlaws. That doesn't mean that they are welcome to return to the Life Research Association. What if their domestic enemies still remember them? What if certain high-ranked officials of the LRA begin to push our clan away due to this reason? Have you thought of these possibilities?"

Ves frowned. "I.. no. Goddammit, Gloriana, I'm not a politician!"

"That doesn't mean you should overlook these basic but very impactful consequences! Bringing the wrong people might be taken as a provocation to certain factions. While the LRA isn't as powerful as the Friday Coalition or the Hexadric Hegemony, it is still capable of crushing our entire fleet with its military!"

The need to hire a diplomat or someone adept at managing both politics and external relations became greater.

Though Calabast already somewhat fulfilled this role, she mainly engaged in intrigue. Though diplomacy and intrigue had much in common, they ultimately demanded different approaches and different competences.

Ves didn't have any immediate candidates, sadly. None of his Larkinsons were particularly adept at this job and hiring a third-rater was not the best idea. Only someone who grew up in a second-rate state possessed the innate bearing and ability to command respect from the powers that Ves would likely engage with in the future.

The two began to discuss other destinations that they wished to visit. Ves suggested they should visit the Heavensword Association as well.



"While I don't have an urgent need to visit this state, Ketis and the Swordmaidens would probably love it if we make a stop here. The people of the Heavensword Association are all obsessed with swords."

"I can see how that would benefit them, but we can't divert our entire schedule just to satisfy a small majority of our clansmen."

"We'll just find additional reasons to visit the Heavensword Association. There's bound to be opportunities to earn merits in this state as well."

Majestic Teal offered many more interesting destinations. Though neither Ves nor Gloriana were willing to stay too long, it shouldn't be a problem to see some of the local sights!

#### *Chapter 2334: Cracking the Secret*

Joshua hesitantly pulled Jannzi into a hug. While she didn't push him away, her lack of reaction showed that she didn't care too much about his gesture.

Secretly, he felt quite frustrated! Just as he had made a bit of progress in earning her favor, she suddenly broke through to expert pilot.

Ever since she returned from that amazing battle, it was as if she went back to being aloof again.

Jannzi was still the same person for the most part. Compared to the past, Joshua noticed that she had become a lot more decisive. She never changed her mind either. Once she made a decision, she rarely doubted her choice.

He knew what expert pilots were supposed to be like. Many trueblood Larkinsons spent a lot of time with other expert pilots.

In fact, most Larkinson expert pilots were fairly approachable. They still possessed plenty of warmth and emotions towards their own families.

The problem was that Jannzi acted more distant towards him after she underwent apotheosis. Though he could still sense her love towards the Larkinson Clan, it became more and more difficult for Joshua to connect to her on an individual level.

Maybe.. Their relationship was not to be. Maybe he wasn't the right boyfriend for her. The main reason he hadn't given up yet was because he still possessed a chance to turn this situation around.

He just had to advance to expert pilot as well. Once he became her equal, he should be able to worm himself inside her heart again!

"I need to return to my duties, Joshua." She spoke as she finally shrugged off his arms and rose to her feet. "I have promised to tutor a large number of mech pilots. I can't stay away for long."

"You just tutored a batch of mech pilots earlier!"

"There are many mech pilots in our clan."

"You don't have to spend so much time on guiding them, Jannzi."

"I disagree. We are still in dangerous territory. Our task force's battle prowess has suffered quite a lot. Though my breakthrough allows me to exert greater strength, my Shield of Samar is still a standard mech. The amount of help I can provide in battle is limited. Since I can't exert my strength in piloting mechs, I can damn well make sure to help our other colleagues perform better!"

She didn't accept any further arguments. She left the compartment without another word. Joshua watched her go with a difficult expression on his face.

He gritted his teeth. "Just you wait, Jannzi! I'll catch up with you! I'll earn your acknowledgement. I did it before. I can do it again! My potential isn't any less than yours!"

The sooner he broke through, the better!

Elsewhere on the Redfeather, Commander Melkor processed the mech pilots who perished in the earlier battle.

It was always hard for him to accept the Avatars who died under his command. Sometimes, the responsibility was too much for him. How could he possibly return to the families of the fallen and tell them that their relatives died for a good cause?

The Larkinsons botched their attack on Ulimo Citadel. There was no doubt about that. Even if they won in the end and gained an expert pilot out of it, Melkor would have rather avoided the battle entirely.

He momentarily removed his visor on his face to rub his exhausted eyes. He personally knew some of the Avatars who died. Some of them were even trueblood Larkinsons. Their deaths hurt him even more.

While the clan could easily replenish the losses of adopted Larkinsons, the amount of trueblood relatives in his clan only grew less and less. Until the next generation of Larkinsons grew up, repeated battles only accelerated their fading presence in the clan.

It was not as if Melkor looked down on the adopted. It was just a pity to see the original Larkinsons who initially followed Ves become increasingly less relevant.

It was as if Ves had hoodwinked the trueblood Larkinsons. In the future, the clan would likely be led by Larkinsons who weren't part of the original family. While their bloodline would always persist, their say in matters wouldn't be as significant as before. It was hard for them to lead the entire clan when more than ninety percent of the clan consisted of adopted Larkinsons and their descendants!

His desk terminal chimed. Melkor quickly put his visor back on his face before accepting the call.

A projection of Commander Magdalena appeared in front of him. "Hello, Melkor. Hard day?"

He nodded. "It's not easy. It must be even harder for you. Out of all of our commands, yours suffered the most."

So far, the Living Sentinels have lost almost 300 mech pilots from the time they entered the Nyxian Gap. Considering that the Sentinels actually started off with 500 mech pilots, this was a devastating loss! Much of their carriers had grown much quiet as a result.

Though the Sentinels endured the greatest tragedy, Commander Magdalena kept her composure. "This is not the time to mourn. Not truly. It is fine to spare some thought to the fallen, but don't let it consume your attention. There are many dangers in the Nyxian Gap that can still waylay us as we try to make it out of this region. Even if my Sentinels have difficulty processing the losses, I cannot allow them to wallow in pity."

"I admire your resilience."

"You get used to it." She replied. "I have witnessed worse in the Mech Corps during the height of the Bright-Vesia War. Mech pilots must live with death if they want to retain the courage to step onto the battlefield. This is even more important for mech officers like us. We don't just have to take care of ourselves. We also have to do our best to keep our men and women alive. This is the burden of responsibility."

While the commanders of the Avatars of Myth and the Living Sentinels discussed how to cope with the responsibilities they bore, elsewhere in the fleet, Ketis sat behind a terminal in the design lab of the Scarlet Rose.

Ever since she fought to end the ritual that threatened the task force, she was filled with multiple great ideas.

She felt as if her understanding of mechs and swordsmanship had evolved. Coming up with the Monster Slayer concept was just one of her benefits.

Three different incomplete mech designs projected in front of her. Each of them weren't that good, as Ves already made clear, but they were hers. Just because they possessed faults didn't mean she should throw them away.

She had spent the last days refining them until she was happy with her changes. The mechs became a bit more responsive and a bit more capable of swinging their swords.

Still, it was the fourth projected design that attracted most of her attention.

It was just a sketch for now. Ketis stretched out a finger and added a new line to the collection of contours. The preliminary draft of her Monster Slayer design became a bit more visible.

Though Ketis opted to design a medium mech, the tight proportions of the draft design made it clear that it was oriented around mobility.

Her Monster Slayer was designed to fight against stronger and larger opponents. The design needed to possess a lot of skill expression, and the best way to do that was to increase their mobility.

The price for that was less armor. For a third-class mech, this was a very painful tradeoff.

It was not as bad with second-class designs. Thin and light armor systems still provided at least some effective defense, especially if the Monster Slayer enjoyed a generous budget.

She was sure that Ves would agree to give her the room to design an expensive mech. The Monster Slayer was targeted towards the Swordmaidens.

Ketis wanted to provide her fellow sisters with a mech that best matched their swordsmanship style!

She originally intended to make her Monster Slayer a third-class mech design. However, she changed her mind when she realized that her fellow sisters urgently needed stronger mechs in order to face the enemies of the future.

The problem was that despite her frantic study efforts, she was still too far off from becoming a qualified second-class mech designer.

"It helps that I don't have to study so many different subjects."

She didn't intend to study a lot of subjects related to ranged mechs and other mechs. If she ever needed to add ranged weapons to her mech, she could just ask for help from Ves or other colleagues.

There was no need for her to spread her time too much.

That said, even if she studied the bare minimum of topics, it would still take years for her to get anywhere close to designing a second-class mech!

"Maybe I should get an implant just like Ves." She muttered.

She was a bit reluctant to do so. While she didn't share Ves' paranoia, right now she wasn't satisfied with her current options. Ves managed to obtain a CFA implant. If Ketis wanted to keep up with him and not be left in the dust, she needed something that was just as good!

"How difficult can it be to obtain a first-class implant?"

The difficulty was immense! Decent first-class implants likely cost more than the entire net worth of the Larkinson Clan!

This was a huge gap that Ketis could never catch up in the short term. The only way for her to buy such an implant was to make a lot of money by designing commercially-successful mech designs.

Right now, she wasn't confident in her ability to earn so much money. Her mech designs simply weren't as compelling as the mechs designed by Ves. Unlike the designs projected in front of her face, every work from her mentor possessed a touch of life!

Though Ketis primarily obsessed about swords, she also appreciated what Ves was able to do. There were plenty of times where she felt envious at how much he could add to his mech designs despite not adding any special components.

"Somehow, he's adding something invisible to his mech designs. What is it? How does he do it? Can I do the same?"

She stared at her mech designs. She focused on her 'defensive' dual-wielding swordsman mech. Its two thick swords looked ready to slice apart a mech or hold its thick swords in a defensive posture to block incoming attacks.

She concentrated really hard and tried to emulate Ves.

Nothing happened.

"What am I missing?"

She puzzled over the problem before her eyes lit up. She suddenly had a good idea!

"Ves has his gods, but I have my swords!"

She grabbed her CFA greatsword and pulled it out of its sheath. She stood up from her desk and pointed its lengthy tip at her dual-wielding swordsman mech design.

"Sharpie! Bless this mech design with.. with.. with your sword energy! Sharpen its blades and help it cut through its enemies! Go!"

Much to her delight, Sharpie seemed to reacted to her request! The Grand Cutter grew more active and Ketis felt as if her mind sword drained a part of her concentration.

She suddenly blanked out for a moment as her mind sword released all of its energy!

When she recovered from her momentary blackout, she almost collapsed back onto her seat. She hastily placed her sword back onto her desk before she accidentally cut something.

"What was that?!"

It took half a minute for her to recover from her unexpected mental exertion. She still felt lethargic.

She turned her attention to her mech design and stared at it for a while. Had Sharpie blessed its swords?

"Why does it look the same?"

Maybe once was not enough.

"Can you do that trick again, Sharpie?"

Her sword intent reacted negatively.

"Oh... maybe tomorrow?"

A part of her was disappointed at the lack of results. Another part of her believed she accomplished something.

"I definitely did something! Maybe I've cracked the secret to how Ves makes his mechs alive!"

### *Chapter 2335: Hexer Influence*

Colonel Kellandra Wodin stood in her office. She gazed outside a heavily-reinforced window.

A large sprawl of buildings stretched out before her sight. Ever since thousands of Wodin Warriors arrived at Cinach VI, they all needed somewhere to stay and provide security to the nearby Larkinson Clan.

The Wodin Dynasty erected a heavily-fortified hexagram-sided base next to the compound rented by the Larkinsons.

The sheer breadth and depth of the new Hexer base significantly exceeded anything the Larkinsons witnessed. The Wodins spared no effort in fortifying it. Each base section gleamed with superior alloys. Powerful turrets and missile banks covered a very large envelope. Some of the weapons were so powerful in fact that they even threatened targets in orbit!

Best of all was that the construction elements were all modular. Once the Hexers no longer needed to stay in the Cinach System, the Wodin Warriors only needed days to pack up all of the building blocks and depart from this rustic star system.

She sneered. After staying in Cinach for several weeks, she was more than ready to return to the Hegemony.

Every Sentinel citizen or official she met always cowered in front of her presence. The misguided foreigners all behaved as if she and her fellow Hexers were aberrations.

Fools!

The Hexers were the only people who accepted the truth! Women were superior! The main reason why the rest of the galaxy rejected this truth was because the boys in charge perpetuated it for selfish reasons!

Still, as much as she wanted to malign every boy who had risen far above their station, she knew she needed to be patient. As long as the Komodo War followed the current trend, it was only a matter of time before the Hexadric Hegemony conquered the Friday Coalition. Taking over the Komodo Star Sector was just the beginning!

Still, she wasn't entirely blind to the competence of the Fridaymen. The resistance they put up so far showed that the boys in charge of their state were willing to commit everything to drag out the war. The more death and destruction that ensued, the more the Fridaymen reveled in the chaos.

Typical boys.

Speaking of that, Kellandra's mind was on another boy.

"As far as my observations tell me, Ves Larkinson is a typical example of a boy who has gained too much power." Melody Raft dutifully reported to the powerful Wodin. "He is greedy. He embraces violence. He has a penchant for taking risks, only to let his subordinates suffer the consequences of his bad decisions. He is very much a boy that poses the greatest threat to society."

Kellandra sneered. "Why hasn't Gloriana reined him in yet? She has been taught to corral boys as well as any other female Hexer."

"I.. do not exactly know, colonel."



"Give me your best guess."

"She... loves him. The current him. What I mean by that is that Miss Gloriana would much rather work with and live alongside Mr. Ves when he is at his most unrestrained. As creative professionals, Gloriana values passion and dedication, and Mr. Ves has those in spades. In our perspective, he may be a threat to society, but your sister doesn't really care about that. Even if Mr. Ves burns the entire galaxy, she won't mind if it helps them design better mechs. She might even participate in the arson if that helps her obtain better results!"

A tense silence followed as Kellandra digested those remarks. She did not doubt Melody's words at all. The Wodin dynasty thoroughly trained the personal assistant before assigning her to her current charge. Her loyalty was impeccable and she was trained to study all manner of human interaction.

What Kellandra just heard made her disappointed in her sister. Had they pampered Gloriana too much? Perhaps allowing her to travel to Centerpoint was a mistake.

"Can this be remedied?"

"No, ma'am." Melody immediately replied. "She will reject any attempts that she believes will harm her ambition. She harbors some very lofty goals. While I am not a mech designer, she has frequently described the immense difficulty of reaching them. She is willing to do almost anything to reach the rank of Master Mech Designer. Consorting with a boy and allowing him to retain his worst impulses is more than acceptable to Miss Gloriana. In fact, she sees it as a benefit."

"How so?" Kellandra raised an eyebrow.

"Just like other boys, Mr. Ves possesses a limited imagination. He can't design a good mech without gaining inspiration, and the way he gains it is through violence. He is addicted to danger because he can gain some very potent ideas for his next mech design. Take his current excursion to the Nyxian Gap for example. He has literally driven hundreds of clansmen and exiled Hexers to their deaths by ordering them to storm a heavily-fortified pirate base. To make it worse, the pirates have deployed hundreds of weapons of mass destruction."

"How have the Larkinsons managed to achieve victory?"

"The details of the battle are rather murky to us, ma'am." Melody said with regret. "All I can tell for now is that the Larkinsons hijacked some of the prohibited superweapons and turned them against their former owner. Mr. Ves personally had to request dispensation from the MTA to allow his people to do so without repercussion."

Neither of the two women thought well of this course of action.



"What a beast." Kellandra snarled. "The more I learn about Gloriana's boy, the more I see the worst of humanity in him. His affinity for death and destruction is among the worst that I have seen in some time!"

"The plan went well for a time until a deviation occurred. The pirates deployed some sort of emergency measure that had threatened to annihilate every Larkinson mech involved in the attack. Only a last-minute breakthrough by a Larkinson expert candidate caused them to turn the situation around."

Word of the Larkinson Clan's first expert pilot had already spread throughout their local base. The Wodins hadn't missed the news.

"A woman had to save the Larkinsons from defeat." Kellandra ironically smiled. "In the end, the superior gender always has to bail out boys whenever they overreach themselves. When will they ever learn?"

"The Larkinson Clan enjoys a high proportion of expert candidates for an organization of its size. This is partially due to its heritage and partially due to the ability of Mr. Ves to attract them. We have also received word from your brother Brutus that his charge has advanced to expert pilot as well. It is very possible that the clan will soon be blessed with multiple expert pilots."

"All women, I suppose?"

"All but one, colonel."

"Good." Kellandra nodded in satisfaction. "Those women will help rein in my sister's lover. No one can ignore the will of an expert pilot. We should try and reach out to these women. Have we done so already?"

Melody looked reluctant. "We.. tried. Sadly, every Larkinson expert candidate has rejected our entreaties. Our mere status and perceived reputation as Hexers has made it difficult to befriend them, let alone hold a cordial conversation with them. It is difficult to get through their unenlightened minds."

"Continue the effort. Don't give up. It will be too late to enlighten them to the truth when they reach the rank of expert pilot."

"We shall continue to try. Our best option is to approach an expert candidate of the so-called Swordmaidens. It is very clear that this mech troop has some very strong Hexer roots."

Kellandra perked up at that. "Then why haven't we managed to turn them to our side?"

"They are.. stubborn. Their history is also very murky. Many of our fellow Hexers look down on them as degenerates. They're not even as good as third-raters as most of

them have emerged from the frontier. The Swordmaidens are former pirates. Even if they have scrubbed their names, they still can't hide the savagery that lies within their bones."

"That is no reason to look down on them, Melody. If every other expert candidate in the Larkinson Clan is unapproachable, then we need to exploit the only opening that we have left."

"It's too late, ma'am. Commander Dise and her Swordmaidens doesn't have the best impression of us when she first met the Glory Battalion. Their animosity towards us has solidified as they have slowly become more integrated in the Larkinson Clan."

Kellandra frowned. "Traitors. They are women, are they not? Why are these Swordmaidens embracing the Larkinsons when their values are more aligned with ours?"

"Much of it has to do with the characteristic glows emanated by their mechs. After spending an extensive amount of time alongside Gloriana, I have gradually realized that there are more to these glows than is apparent. The Superior Mother that has benefited the Hex Army so much is but one of multiple gods that Mr. Ves is able to channel in his works. There are other gods, including one that the Larkinsons call the Golden Cat."

"I thought the Larkinsons adopted their cat symbolism because Mr. Ves adores felines."

"That is true, but there is more to it than you think. The Golden Cat is real. She is a similar existence to the Superior Mother. Of course, our Supreme is much stronger and more majestic, but the Larkinsons have each developed an invisible connection to their own god. Gloriana has mentioned that something of a network exists between every Larkinson. It causes them to recognize each other and makes it easier to recognize each other as kin. It's actually quite distressing to witness the influence the Golden Cat has on everyone who becomes a Larkinson. She is also the primary reason why all of our Hexers have failed to join the clan. Their god does not allow our entry."

Kellandra grew grave when she heard that. "The Golden Cat changes those who join the clan? Including my sister?"

"Yes. The changes are already somewhat apparent on Miss Gloriana. It is as if she is affected by a permanent glow. Even if she still recognizes herself as a Hexer, she is becoming more open to misguided ideas."

"This sounds dangerous. Why are we allowing the Larkinsons to brainwash my sister?!"

"Please calm down, colonel. I have constantly kept Minister Constance in the loop. Her vision is broader than ours. She loves her daughter as much as you. She is aware of the risks, but believes the current trajectory will benefit her daughter, herself, the Wodin Dynasty and our great state the most."

"Why?!"

"First, the brainwashing you describe is not too strong. Gloriana is a woman raised in the right way. She has never given up her identity as a Hexer. While her changes are not desirable in our eyes, they will help her interact with the people she will be dealing with in the future once the Larkinson Clan embarks on its expedition."

"That doesn't give me much comfort."

"Second, the moniker of Miracle Couple is not an exaggeration." Melody continued. "Gloriana's design potential has truly lifted off once she has started to collaborate with Mr. Ves. There is an even greater mech than the Blessed Squire in development. Once the Hex Army receives this new model, some of our female military mech pilots will be able to gain a powerful new offensive option. Minister Constance believes that keeping her daughter in the Larkinson Clan may significantly benefit our war effort."

As much as she disliked it, Kellandra agreed with this argument. The Hegemony was in a tough battle. While the Hegemony would surely be able to vanquish the Coalition, she wouldn't reject an opportunity to end the war sooner and spare the lives of millions of valiant Hexers.

"If my mother has made this choice, then so be it." The mech colonel sighed. "Please tell me about the reorganization of the Glory Seekers. How can we ensure that they will remain loyal Hexers and loyal to the Wodin Dynasty even as they accompany the Larkinsons in their upcoming journey?"

"We have implemented multiple ways to..."

#### *Chapter 2336: Longevity Contradiction*

Ves withdrew from the Desolate Soldier that he had moved to the workshop. In order to open up enough space to work on the mech, he had to move the statue of the Unending One to the Scarlet Rose's hangar bay.

The mech technicians stationed there did not appreciate their close proximity to the unnerving black statue. The objections only died down after someone draped a huge curtain over the monstrous-looking ornament.

In any case, ever since the Desolate Soldier mech arrived, Ves had been tinkering with it without much aim or direction.

He studied the mech. He inspected its systems. He familiarized himself with its spiritual foundation.

The mech was in use for a while, but due to its relatively low performance, it was mostly used as either a backup mech or a training mech.

It hadn't been used in battle since the Larkinson Clan left the Ylvaine Protectorate. The machine basically took up space and that was why the Living Sentinels were glad to pass it over to Ves. Its silver coating looked almost as good as new, which further reinforced the notion that it was a neglected mech.

Ves didn't like to see that, but this was an inevitable outcome of the growing prosperity of the Larkinson Clan. The Desolate Soldier was solely designed to offer a cheap but effective option to resist the sandman invasion. Its relevance against powerful human opponents was not that great. If not for its glow, the LMC would have retired the model already.

Even then, the Larkinson Clan had better options. Many customers throughout the Komodo Star Sector still appreciated the Desolate Soldier's duty-based glow, but the Larkinson mech pilots had come to prefer the warmth of the Bright Warriors.

The Desolate Soldier encouraged mech pilots to fight for a noble cause.

The Bright Warrior encouraged Larkinsons to fight for their family.

Of course, it also helped that the Bright Warrior was a bridge mech that exceeded any third-class mech in the clan's lineup. Many mech pilots were jealous at the few lucky Avatars who were privileged to pilot these powerful machines.

Just their awesome defensive capabilities was enough to drool over. In the previous battle, hardly any Bright Warrior had succumbed! The survival rate of their mech pilots evoked a lot of jealousy and requests to supply these mechs to the Sentinels and every other mech troop.

"It's not that easy." He shook his head. "The supply of Breyer alloy is limited. I already have some better mechs in store for our clan. In time, all of our mech pilots will be paired with proper second-class mechs."

He had different plans in store, but they had to wait until he returned to civilized space. He turned his attention back to the mech he had just finished servicing.

Though the mech technicians assigned to perform maintenance on the mech had done a decent job in keeping it in good condition, their lack of care was apparent. Who wanted to invest a disproportionate effort to fix a tiny problem buried deep in the mech's internals?

While most mechs were designed with robustness and sudden failures in mind, Ves couldn't stand the neglect. He spent multiple days fixing every little problem he managed to detect and restore the mech to its peak condition.

It was an extremely wasteful use of his time. As a mech designer, just an hour's worth of his time was potentially worth billions of hex credits! This was because he could have

spent his time on completing his mech design projects faster. Once some of them entered the market, Ves was sure to earn a lot of money.

"I don't feel I have wasted my time, though."

He enjoyed tinkering with the Desolate Soldier. The mech might not be flashy, but it was derived from his work. It felt good to revisit one of his soldier works and contemplate what he had accomplished, how much he had progressed since he completed its design and what he still lacked.

When he compared his Desolate Soldier to his current work, he recognized that not a lot had changed.

The Doom Guard was his latest commercial design project. Though it featured a rather innovative terror glow, its main innovation merely consisted of forcing two antagonistic two design spirits together.

The model held value to the market. Even now, its sales continued to increase despite its inherent weaknesses. The ability to intimidate mech pilots could truly save a lot of lives and prevent more losses when utilized correctly.

The problem was that his design philosophy was not as enthusiastic. Working with design spirits may be a possible way to realize his ambitions, but it wouldn't conform to his original vision.

Making mechs alive in a way that caused people to mistake them as gods was certainly a grand achievement. However, a part of him disliked the thought of making powerful living mechs, only for them to be carbon copies of each other.

The only individuality that the vast majority of his existing exhibited was the faint traces their users left on the mechs.

To mechs such as the Desolate, Doom Guard and the Blessed Guard, these deviations weren't intentional. They were accidents. It was similar to how someone used a tool. Long use caused the tool to acquire scratches, wear marks and other imperfections.

In many cases, tools had to be precise in order to provide the most value to their users. Any damage or deviation from the norm degraded the value of the mech.

This was not what Ves wanted in his products. Life should not be an accident, nor should its value diminish as it grew.

Life was something to be cherished. A mech like the Desolate Soldier mech in front of him deserved a better fate than being left in the dust.

He even felt tempted to upgrade its armament so that it would become relevant in battle again.

"I can't." He shook his head. "I'm better off selling this mech on the second-hand market. There are plenty of people looking for bargains."

This should be the most proper way to dispose of a working mech. Just because users such as the Larkinson Clan had outgrown the Desolate Soldier did not mean the rest of the mech market disdained these good machines.

He knew that many mercenary corps and other private outfits often had difficulty keeping their heads above the water. Buying discounted second-hand goods that delivered almost just as much performance as a brand-new product was a good way for them to stay in business.

Of course, buying second-hand mechs was not really proper due to their reduced longevity. Even the Desolate Soldier that Ves had just finished servicing still showed signs of age that weren't so easily to remedy.

"I haven't really designed this mech with extreme longevity and durability in mind." Ves murmured.

The mech was only supposed to work long enough to last the Sand War. He had made many compromises that allowed him to increase performance at the cost of longevity.

His future works didn't make so many tradeoffs. They were far more expensive than the Desolate Soldier and meant to last at least ten years of regular use. Gloriana also disliked this tradeoff. Mechs that were pushed to their limits were significantly more likely to malfunction over the course of their lifetime.

"Legacy mechs need to be able to live for a long time." He concluded after contemplating the fate of the Desolate Soldier mech in front of him. "My living mechs deserve to live longer than a couple of years. It would be quite sad if most of them are discarded or recycled after five years of battle. That's way too short for my liking. This kind of treatment is reserved for cattle!"

The reason why he preferred to design premium and more expensive mechs was because it fit best with his aim of making his mechs withstand the test of time. A good mech model could last for two whole mech generations before becoming obsolete. That was forty years at minimum, which ought to be plenty of time for living mechs to enjoy a fruitful life.

"Is that enough?"

Ves didn't know. He wanted his mechs to last even longer than that, but that was difficult to accomplish.

"There is a contradiction."

The spiritual components of his mechs always developed and grew stronger over time.

In contrast, the physical components of his mechs definitely weakened over time. Either they wore out or the progression of newer and better technologies turned them obsolete.

If Ves truly wanted to turn his products into legacy mechs that increased in value over time, then he had to reconcile these two opposing developments.

"One solution is to actively upgrade my products."

This was a costly and wasteful solution to many mech owners. Who wanted to waste at least half the price of an old mech to upgrade its parts, only to obtain a stronger that was still constrained by its original design?

The burden was too great. Existing owners had to hire mech designers or other specialists to upgrade an existing mech without crippling it. The other solution was for Ves and Gloriana to revise the design with upgradability in mind.

This was the most ideal solution to his customers. By designing a Mark II of the Desolate Soldier in a way that allowed owners of the Mark I edition to easily update their mechs with an LMC-supplied upgrade kit was the most practical solution to keep his older products relevant.

Yet the burden on Ves was massive. He would have to constrain his design choices with upgradeability in mind.

"This sounds like a nightmare!"

For now, Ves wasn't able to come up with an easy solution. Everyone he thought about were either prohibitively expensive or imposed too much of a burden on his design work.

It would have been great if he could design more mechs like the Devil Tiger. Out of all of his current, only his first masterwork embodied his aims to the greatest degree!

He found it rather funny that he only made this realization a short time ago. Before then, Ves always thought of the Devil Tiger to be an aberration. He originally regarded it as an experiment to explore some usual ideas.

"I was wrong." He shook his head.

The Desolate Soldier might be his greatest commercial success, but the Devil Tiger represented the peak of his current work!



This was because the tiger mech was one of his few products that inherently solved the contradiction.

Over time, both its spiritual character and its physical makeup grew stronger. The powerful ASMAS allowed the Devil Tiger to constantly strengthen its structure and many of its parts.

In hindsight, Ves realized that the Devil Tiger was the first he designed with physical growth in mind! By adding this core feature to his bestial mech, he ensured that the mech had the potential to remain relevant beyond two mech generations!

With proper care, the Devil Tiger might even live thousands of years, turning it into a true god in the form of a machine!

Though Ves felt immensely pleased at what he had accomplished with this design, his smile quickly dropped as he recalled the hefty price to enable such a mech.

"Legacy mechs are unaffordable to the bulk of my market."

ASMAS and other nanomachine-based systems were powerful and adaptable, but they were far too costly. Ves could forget about using them on any third-class mech designs. Even most of his second-class mech designs wouldn't be economical if they incorporated these kinds of solutions.

He hummed a bit. Was it impossible for him to design legacy mechs such as the Devil Tiger?

"Maybe the technology in the future will drive down the cost of nanomachine systems." He guessed.

It happened to many other technologies. As long as the demand was there, plenty of scientists and developers worked hard to increase the practicality of a given solution.

Another way to solve or mitigate the problems related to nanomachine systems was to partner up with a mech designer who specialized them. What would it be like if Ves, who specialized in the spiritual development of a mech, joined forces with a mech designer who specialized in the physical development of a mech?

*Chapter 2337: Not Again*

"Ugh, I can't forget about my future wife."

Though it would be nice to partner with a mech designer who specialized in nanomachine systems, Gloriana might not be okay with this solution.



She already hogged most of the physical development of their collaborative mech designs. Adding a third partner in the mix who encroached on her territory might not end well for everyone involved.

He shook his head. Even without partnering up with a specialist, Ves still believed that solutions such as ASMAS would eventually become accessible to him over time.

Right now, the Larkinson Clan had already grown to the point where it was ready to make use of second-class ships, second-class mechs and other second-class tech. Options that he previously considered unattainable such as positron beam weapons or mech-grade shield generators suddenly came within reach now that the LMC sold more and more mechs.

Ves felt proud for achieving this level of commercial success. Even if he didn't consider his bestsellers such as the Desolate Soldier and the Doom Guard in the best light these days, they at least provided the Larkinson Clan with the resources to transcend its third-class origin.

The same evolution should also apply to nanomachine systems. As his clan grew more prosperous and his proficiency in second-class mech design increased, it should be viable for him to design nanotech-based mechs.

"It might take years. It might take decades. In fact, if I want to start right away, I don't have to beg Gloriana to obtain a batch of pure ASMAS."

While ASMAS was prohibitively expensive, Ves could easily obtain another batch with the LMC's current level of earnings. He could even obtain enough ASMAS to build another self-growing mech by selling some of the loot that Task Force Predator had plundered!

If Ves ever reached a time where he was able to design a first-class mech, then that would be even better. At the highest level of mech design, nanomachine systems became a lot more affordable!

Ves already experienced the power of a mech that was able to adjust its shape spontaneously in battle during one of his Mastery experiences. Though gimmicky, the first-class nanomachine mech he witnessed truly made a strong impression in his mind.

"Should I convert to designing nanomachine mechs exclusively in the future?"

This was a difficult question. Though he felt that designing more mechs such as the Devil Tiger fit well with his design philosophy, there were still a lot of inherent weaknesses to this tech.

Though he had implemented some countermeasures such as binding the pure ASMAS to the design spirit, Ves always feared the possibility that one of his father's enemies might succeed in hacking the nanomachines!

The inherent vulnerability to hacking and tampering was the main reason why nanomachine systems failed to become mainstream. Just because Ves could apply some metaphysical tricks to make it more difficult for someone to tamper with them did not mean that this weakness was gone!

"I guess I'm stuck with making my mechs out of old-fashioned solid components."

The classic mech was the most reliable mech. Though many people attempted to 'evolve' the concept of mechs by developing unconventional products such as biomechs and lithic mechs, the market mostly preferred solid metal mechs since the beginning of the Age of Mechs.

Just earlier, he contemplated whether he should design his first nanotech-based mech after the Devil Tiger for his own clan. The Bright Warrior was a pretty good candidate for revision because it was already designed to change aspects of itself.

Instead of mounting different add-ons on it to alter its configuration, the mech could instead rely on its nanomachine-based frame to alter itself on demand!

"It sounds like a pretty good idea, and cost shouldn't be much of a concern if it remains exclusive to the Larkinson Clan."

The thought of entrusting the lives of most of his Larkinson mech pilots to fallible nanomachines did not sit well with Ves. At the very least, he did not believe he possessed a sufficient understanding of this branch of technology to rule out any shenanigans.

"This is what a mech designer who specializes in nanotech is for. It would be great to partner up with someone who is on top of this game." He muttered.

After a while, Ves stopped his idle musings and focused back to his main priority. He did not waste so much time on tinkering on this Desolate Soldier mech to dream about designing more nanomechs.

Solving the physical aging problem of his mechs was a long-term issue that he wouldn't be able to solve for a very long time. In the meantime, it wasn't as if his mechs were suffering.

"No one lives forever. If humans aren't immortal, then mechs shouldn't be much different."

He turned to its spiritual foundation and tried to find a way to mold it in a way that made it more adaptable to its user. How could he turn the mech into a machine that slowly developed a distinct personality that complemented its mech pilot?

The key was to feed it with an abundant amount of spiritual energy. The mech pilot might not be able to satisfy the mech's hunger, but the Solemn Guardian was a different story!

Aside from Qilanxo and Nyxie, the Solemn Guardian had the least to worry about lacking spiritual energy. So many mech pilots used the Desolate Soldier and its variants every day that the spiritual product had long reached its current level of saturation.

All of this meant that inducing the Solemn Guardian to 'donate' a portion of its spiritual energy shouldn't cause any harm.

"I guess now is as good a time as any to try and see what happens."

The Desolate Soldier mech he serviced had already reached its best possible condition. To Ves, it was more than ready to be experimented upon.

Ves approached the mech and placed his hand on its surface. He closed his eyes and tried to connect with both the mech and the Solemn Guardian.

It wasn't difficult. Every Desolate Soldier was connected to the duty-oriented spiritual product. The Solemn Guardian immediately sensed the presence of Ves.

The two communicated on a spiritual level. Neither of them resorted to words or other human means of communication.

Instead, they conveyed their meaning to each other on a more abstract level. It was very difficult for Ves to describe what he was doing, but it was very effective in making the Solemn Guardian understand what he wanted.

As one of his personal creations, the Solemn Guardian was an obedient design spirit. Since its existence centered around duty, it was very committed to loyalty. The Solemn Guardian was one of the design spirits that Ves was least worried about rebelling or leaving.

Once the Solemn Guardian understood his intentions, Ves moved on to his next step.

He began to extend his influence to the individual spiritual foundation of the Desolate Soldier mech he was touching. He carefully attempted to alter it in order to make it more responsible for the changes to come.

After several minutes, the bond between the mech and its design spirit became active.

A relatively hefty amount of spiritual energy poured into the mech's spiritual foundation!

"Too fast! Slow down!" Ves alarmingly shouted!

The Desolate Soldier mech couldn't take so much energy at once! Once the Solemn Guardian reduced the flow, Ves noticed that the spiritual foundation no longer looked like it was about to crack.

The mech absorbed all of the energy without spilling it. This was good. The bad news was that Ves failed to discern any changes. Though the spiritual foundation of the mech grew deeper, he didn't feel as if its life was blooming from a sapling into a tree.

"It feels like I'm cultivating a clone. No matter how healthy it becomes, it's still deficient when it comes to personality!"

This experiment at least proved that he couldn't artificially age his mechs just by pumping them with an excess of spiritual energy. Even if the Desolate Soldier mech was able to accept the input from the Solemn Guardian due to their close connection, the former did not actually undergo any evolution.

"It looks like life has to develop naturally." He concluded.

This was not entirely out of his expectations. Eventually, the Solemn Guardian seemed to hit some sort of limits and stopped pumping the mech with spiritual energy.

Compared to before, Ves sensed a degree of solidity and energy he hadn't sensed before. Even if the mech's character hadn't developed at all, its overall strength had grown somehow.

"Before, this mech was a mosquito. Now, it's a cockroach. Aside from getting bigger, it hasn't gotten any smarter. They're both stupid bugs."

Ves was curious at the result. All of that spiritual energy pumped into the spiritual foundation of this particular mech had to result in something, right?

The only way to find out was to stuff a mech pilot inside and turn it on to see what happened.

He activated his comm and ordered his security officers to bring a prisoner from the brig. He had already transferred some captured pirate mech pilots to the Scarlet Rose for just this occasion.

While the guards brought his next test subject, Ves prepared the mech for his upcoming experiment.

"I can't very well allow my test subject to take control of his mech and destroy my ship from the inside!"

He began to open up some parts of the mechs again to physically remove or deactivate some of the control mechanisms. He also entered the cockpit to modify the programming of the mech.

As an added precaution, he activated the workshop's heavy-duty clamps to forcefully keep the mech in place.

Once he was done, he retreated from the machine and greeted his next test subject.

"MMMFPHFMMFFM!" A muffled pirate raged at Ves. "MMFMMFM!"

The former Dry Snake turned captive did not exactly consent to participating in this experiment.

No matter. Pirates weren't entitled to human rights.

"Put him in the cockpit and make sure to restrain him to the piloting chair. You can leave after that." He commanded.

"Yes, sir."

The two security officers dragged the prisoner to a lifter platform which elevated them to the opening of the cockpit.

After slipping inside, the two guards reemerged without the prisoner. Ves approached a workstation connected to the Desolate Soldier mech and confirmed the prisoner was held firmly in place.

"Alright, let's see how our test subject fares." Ves grinned.

Ves activated the mech from remote. As the machine slowly booted up, the captive restrained to the piloting seat began to tug and hurl his entire body for some reason.

"There is no reason to worry." Ves transmitted to the cockpit. "Calm down and don't resist. Just interface the mech and everything will be over soon."

"MMHMMHPHMM!"

The mech pilot did not do as he said. Instead, the pirate captive thrashed more and more. Ves began to check the telemetry and noticed that the pilot's stress levels and other physiological signs kept rising without stop.

Not only that, but the spiritual activity inside the mech seemed to grow more volatile as well. Ever since the pirate mech pilot started interfacing with the altered Desolate Soldier, something very weird was happening.

"Wait a minute. This is heading into dangerous territory!"

Before Ves could interrupt the start-up procedure, the pirate let out an agonizing muffled cry!

"MMMFFWMEFWMEWOWW—"

Through his spiritual senses, Ves sensed the spiritual activity inside the mech had spiked!

Bang!

At the same time, the projection of the interior of the mech turned bloody as the head of the captive mech pilot exploded!

The mech abruptly interrupted its start-up procedure on its own. Without a mech pilot, here was no meaning for the mech to come online.

Its mech pilot was dead.

"..."

Ves stared at the bloody chunks of bone and brain matter splattered all over the consoles and interior of the cockpit.

"GODDAMMIT! NOT AGAIN!"

*Chapter 2338: Lethal Threshold*

It took longer for Ves to figure out why the experiment failed than to clean the interior of the cockpit.

As Ves became more accustomed to the explosive results of some of his failures, his cleaning bots evolved as well. They had cleaned up so many bodies and sticky bodily remains that their AIs developed even better and better methods to get rid of all of the messes he made.

"Quite handy." Ves nodded as he witnessed the army of bots exiting the cockpit.

The interior had been thoroughly cleaned and sterilized until not a single speck of blood or dust was left.

In fact, Ves could lick his tongue all over the piloting chair and consoles without any worry!

Not that he would do it. He loved mechs, but not in that way.

He coughed. "Enough thinking about irrelevant stuff. Let's get back to business."

Why did his test subject's head explode?

From his experience, spiritual energy was wondrous and potent. Ves and many other people could literally warp reality by utilizing it in specific ways.

While Ves followed the path of a creator and chose to specialize in channeling this energy into empowering his mechs, others accomplished more direct outcomes.

Expert pilots such as Venerable Jannzi and ancient 'dark gods' like the Unending One directly channeled their powers to affect their enemies and allies!

That was something Ves couldn't do with his limited applications. He was largely limited to setting up his forces for success.

In any case, only a small number of people were capable of harnessing and manipulating spiritual energy.

Those without spiritual potential possessed the least sensitivity towards it. This protected them somewhat against spiritual attacks, but obviously this wasn't foolproof. The artificial anomaly the Grey Watcher had summoned warped the fabric of reality around people.

People with spiritual potential were a bit more special. They possessed greater sensitivity towards spiritual energy but also possessed a bit more strength to resist its negative influence.

The problem was that unless they tapped their potential, it was largely undeveloped. Potential did not necessarily equal strength. It merely paved the way for the future. The individual in question still had to make something out of this gift.

When Ves ran through his spiritual observations, he roughly guessed why the experiment went wrong.

"The mech has become too strong."

Ves overlooked something. Even though the empowered Desolate Soldier mech hadn't developed an individual personality, it still retained the character inherent in its design!

Desolate Soldiers stood for duty. They also represented both honor and sacrifice. The entire mech's purpose revolved around serving a greater cause because it was the right thing to do. Any mech pilot that was reasonably good in character easily gained the mech's acceptance.

It was the opposite towards ruffians.

During the Sand War, Ves developed a variant that was more acceptable to underground organizations. This was necessary because the base model was seen as too upright and proper by the more selfish, ferocious and immoral mech pilots.

Once the LMC released the Prideful Soldier, irregular mech pilots such as Raella Larkinson were finally able to pilot a Soldier mech without fighting against their own machines!

What Ves just noticed from this experiment was that the Desolate Soldier in front of him exhibited the same rejection reaction towards his test subject.

The Desolate Soldier abhorred the depravity and selfishness of typical pirates. Sticking one of them in its cockpit was a recipe for disaster!

"The difference here is that the disaster is at least an order of magnitude greater than usual!"

The answer was that simple. The intense rejection exhibited by the mech would have taken place even if Ves hadn't commanded the Solemn Guardian to saturate it with spiritual energy.

What usually happened in these situations was that the mech pilot would just barely be able to pilot his machine. The mech and design spirit actively disliked the mech pilot and tried their best to put up difficulties. These hindrances usually weren't too threatening, because what could the spirituality of a mech actually do? It's strength was very limited, especially when they hardly had any time to develop.

"I changed that." Ves realized. "It's as if I enlarged a tiny ant into a formidable monster who towers over me. The creature is still the same, but the scale is on another level!"

Simple actions such as biting his skin turned from a minor annoyance into a life-threatening scenario!

Since Ves attempted to pair up his empowered mech with a highly incompatible mech pilot, the life within the Desolate Soldier did not hold back in attempting to repel the unwanted visitor.

Mechs weren't human! They weren't raised as one and did not undergo the decades-long nurturing and indoctrination that taught them how to behave in certain situations.



They were killing machines. The most they could do was to assist any friendlies, disregard any neutrals and kill any enemies. Nothing else!

Though Ves genuinely made a mistake in overlooking the likelihood of provoking a rejection reaction, he could not be blamed for missing the fact it would produce a result as extreme as head explosions.

Lately, that only happened when he went too far in performing spiritual surgery on his test subjects.

He should have recalled the times when he experimented on the indigous folk of Aeon Corona VII.

Back then, he hadn't developed an elaborate repertoire of spiritual techniques. He mainly messed around with neural interfaces to achieve results.

"This is kind of similar." Ves hummed.

The mech had become too strong. The man-machine connection may be able to protect its own mech pilots from getting attacked by excessive neural input, but it wasn't programmed to modulate the spiritual input from the mech!

Without any safety limits, the mech was able to leverage its full strength against the mech pilot it hated without any reserve.

Ves grimaced and scratched his head. "This isn't something I can restrain."

He did not specialize in neural interface technology. While he learned a few scattered bits of knowledge about them, he didn't really know how to set up a gate that limited the maximum spiritual input of a mech to a range that was tolerable to humans.

Even if he did possess the capability, he wouldn't do it anyway. The MTA didn't give him the approval to tinker with neural interfaces. If he was caught doing so, his career would probably be over!

"Not even Master Willix can bail me out if that happens!"

Rules were rules. As much as Master Willix showed obvious interest in his work, she still held strong opinions against anyone who broke the MTA's taboos.

Ves looked at his mech and figured that it was too strong for its own good. Let alone sticking another test subject in its cockpit, Ves didn't even want to subject his own clansmen to such a dangerous mech!

Even if the empowered Desolate Soldier cooperated well with a Larkinson mech pilot, Ves didn't want to take the risk.

He needed to reverse what he had done. He needed to weaken the Desolate Soldier so that it wasn't able to kill its own mech pilot whenever it liked!

"Can you give back some of what you absorbed?" He mentally asked the mech.

It didn't respond.

"Figures."

Ves contacted the Solemn Guardian and asked the design spirit to forcefully take back half of the spiritual energy it donated to the mech.

To his surprise, the Solemn Guardian was able to do this, though the process wasn't smooth. Its connection to the Desolate Soldier mechs were very close.

Even if the machine in question was unwilling, it couldn't cut off the connection or prevent its energy from being taken away. The design spirit was too strong compared to the mech!

"This is rather useful!" He grinned.

The interaction showed that his design spirits could harvest the spiritual energy of any mech it chose, though Ves noticed it became harder over time.

It seemed that the spiritual energy that the Solemn Guardian recently donated was still under its control. The rest, which included the mech's original spiritual foundation, remained largely untouched.

Were his design spirits able to strip the spiritual foundations of his mechs? Ves wasn't sure. Due to the direct connection between the design spirit and mech, there weren't any barriers in the way. The only troublesome aspect was that it was harder to affect spiritual energy that didn't belong to the entity in question.

While it sounded unlikely for this to happen, Ves still needed to take the possibility into account. What if his design spirits betrayed him one day? What if they wanted to stab him in the back? Killing the life within every active mech in use was a dastardly way to harm his reputation!

He shook his head. "This isn't something that is likely to happen. I'll probably figure something out in the future."

Once the Solemn Guardian took away half of the energy it originally passed over, the presence of the Desolate Soldier mech had weakened by a huge margin. It didn't appear as filled with life as before.

"Bring in our next captive." He commanded his guards.

He repeated the initial experiment. Every condition remained the same. When Ves stepped in front of his workstation and activated the command to boot up the mech, he paid close attention to the interior of the cockpit and the life signs of the mech pilot.

Just like the previous prisoner, the guards stuffed his mouth with a gag.

"MMWMMFWMMFM!"

Ves frowned. The increased anxiety, rising heart rate, increased brain activity, rising body temperature and violent physical moments were very familiar.

Was the mech still too strong?

"MMMOWWMWWOOWOWWWWWFF!"

Even when it looked as if the test subject's head was approaching its limits, Ves did not interrupt the experiment. He wanted to let the situation play out in order to record the complete result.

"I still have a couple of test subjects to spare." He muttered.

After a couple of minutes, the test subject abruptly collapsed in his piloting chair. The pirate no longer fought against his restraints.

Ves frowned. He studied the telemetry and noticed that while the mech pilot's physiological indicators remained active, much of his brain activity had dropped.

This conformed with what he had seen with his spiritual senses. The mech hammered the man's spiritual potential. While the force of the mech's spiritual resistance wasn't as overwhelming, it was still sufficient to break the spirit of its current mech pilot!

The final result was that his second test subject had died in spirit, if not in body.

Sure, the man's body was still intact. Sure, his head hadn't exploded. Yet the loss of his spirit made him indistinguishable from a clone.

The test subject wasn't strictly a human anymore. Instead, the body had devolved into a collection of flesh, bone and other body tissues. The structure was there, but the body no longer held the spark of life that granted it sentience.

Some bots entered the cockpit and removed the inanimate body. Ves had no interest in keeping a useless bag of flesh and bone, so he commanded the bots to chuck it out of the airlock.

Space was one of the biggest garbage dumps in reality. No matter how much junk people ejected into space, there was no way it would ever fill up to capacity!

"Hmm, let's try again, shall we? This time, I'll see what happens if the mech only has a quarter of its strength left."

The third attempt proceeded much better than the previous two times. The severely weakened Desolate Soldier mech still resisted its pirate mech pilot, but its attempts at lashing out only induced severe headaches and mental torture to its mech pilot.

"MMMEMFEMWFMWWM! MWMEMFEMWEMFWM! MMEMFMWMMW!"

The muffled screams of the third test subject sounded like music to his ears. As long as the mech pilot was still thrashing and capable of expressing his discomfort, he was still alive!

"Finally, a success!"

He established a general impression of the lethal threshold of a mech towards mech pilots with spiritual potential.

This was not enough, though. If he wanted to understand this phenomenon to the fullest, then he had to obtain hostile mech pilots who lacked this potential.

The problem was that he didn't have any test subjects who met this criteria. He regretted his decision to allow the clan to execute them before leaving Ulimo Citadel.

Since Task Force Predator hadn't met any pirate groups lately, Ves would have to wait for a very long time until he gained the test subjects he required.

Was there a way to remedy this problem?

"Wait a minute. What if I make them myself?"

Was it possible for him to destroy or strip someone's spiritual potential?

That sounded rather difficult without killing them. Still, it was worth a try!

### *Chapter 2339: Spiritual Tolerance*

Directly affecting others through spiritual manipulation wasn't as easy as it sounded. From his earlier experiments, he learned that people with spiritual potential possessed a defense mechanism that caused their spirituality to turtle up and become almost untouchable.

While this largely cut the mech pilot off his own spirit, any external threat would have a very hard time abusing it any further.

What Ves sought this time was not to find a way to alter it. He wasn't trying to figure out how to create expert candidates and expert pilots on demand.

He wanted to achieve the opposite result. He wanted to downgrade a mech pilot with spiritual potential to someone who was still alive but spiritually dull.

"This will be a delicate operation."

Ves had moved to an enclosed test chamber elsewhere on his ship. He ordered his guards to bring in another captive pirate and strap the fellow down to an operation table.

Once the guards left, Ves approached the scared and thrashing pirate and contemplated his options.

What he wanted to do was very cruel. People who were lucky enough to develop spiritual potential possessed more chances at achieving greatness. Becoming an expert pilot or Journeyman was a dream to many people, but the strength of their spirit determined whether they could even open these doors.

To Ves, depriving someone of most of their spiritual potential was almost as bad as killing them. He felt as if there was something profoundly wrong and abhorrent about what he was about to do.

"Why do I feel this way?" He frowned.

In a way, the act went against everything he wanted to accomplish. As a creator and a service provider, he oriented his life around improving the lives of those who used his products.

The thought of millions of mech pilots happily using and entrusting their lives to their LMC mechs gave Ves an immense amount of satisfaction. His success fueled his motivation to continue with his work and develop even better ways to meet the demands of his customers.

According to this outlook, it was wrong for him to induce actual harm to his people. Developing ways to actively harm people sounded more like something the Five Scrolls Compact would do. What he wanted to do was exactly what the MTA least wanted to occur!

"Well, it's for a good reason." Ves shrugged and excused himself. "As long as I succeed in figuring out how to design a legacy mech, then everything will be fine!"

After solving his moral conundrum, he faced his frightened test subject without any measure of guilt. Scientific progression couldn't be stopped. If he wanted to make a few omelets, then he had to break some eggs.

Ves grinned at the thought of what he was about to do. "I've never done anything like this before. How exciting! Let's see how I can cripple you. Don't worry. You probably won't die!"

The test subject in question only fought harder against his restraints!

"MMMEMMMFMWWMFMFV!"

"Calm down, man! Don't you know how hard it is to perform a surgical operation on you when you are lashing out all the time?"

Despite his advice, the man did not follow his advice despite the fact it was in his best interests to do so. Why were pirates so stupid?

"Oh well, don't blame me if anything goes wrong."

In order to affect someone's spiritual potential, he had to worm inside the person's mind. The key was to perform his operation quickly. If more than a second passed, his test subject's spirit would probably realize it was under attack and bury itself in a hole. By then, it was too late for Ves to do anything meaningful for a long time.

For this reason, he wasn't in a hurry to do something. He carefully accumulated his energy and formed a strong and stable spiritual knife in his mind.

Though the pirate was unwilling to subject himself to a dangerous experiment, he could only thrash against his restraints for so long. The fellow slowly tired himself out. When the pirate gradually grew tense but less afraid, Ves finally struck!

He held his palm over the test subject's face to gain access and thrust his spiritual knife forward.

Cut!

With a single attack, Ves attempted to cut off around seventy percent of the pirate's spiritual potential!

Yet as soon as his 'knife' touched its target, he barely had any time to cut off a chunk of spirit before his attack became invalid.

The man's spirit had rapidly engaged its self-defense mechanism!

"MMFMMEV!"

The pirate's stress levels abruptly spiked as the man experienced unimaginable pain! Even so, the vast majority of his spiritual potential remained intact, if temporarily bottled up in order to protect it against external influence!

Vs frowned at this outcome. His test subject's spiritual potential was a lot more reactive towards active threats than against other forms of manipulation. Its reaction time was pretty insane!

No matter how much he thrust his spiritual knife, the man's spiritual potential had already entered a different phase. There was no way for Ves to proceed with his experiment.

"Damnit. Off you go, then. Bring in the next test subject!"

He thought about why he failed. Now that he looked back on what he had done, he realized that his test subject was still on guard against him when he performed his cutting procedure.

"I knew it wouldn't be so easy." He sighed.

Ves believed he might achieve better results if he lowered his test subject's guard. Naturally, he wouldn't be able to do so through persuasion. He could only resort to other means.

Once the next test subjects arrived, Ves took out a sedative and injected it into the body of the next pirate to endure his experiment.

"Go to sleep."

Once the pirate fell unconscious, Ves inspected his latest test subject and saw that the spirit was still somewhat active, but not as bad as before.

Just to be sure, Ves waited for an entire hour in order to calm the spirit even further. In the meantime, he spent his time supervising the work of his design teams and made some small tweaks to his ongoing mech designs.

After an hour had passed, his patience wore thin. He returned to the testing chamber and quietly approached his current test subject.

The man had calmed a lot, whether in body, mind or spirit. Though Ves could wait a couple more hours, he didn't think it would make that much of a difference.

He formed his knife and performed a cut without hesitation!

This time, he succeeded!

"MMWMWMWWEFF!"



The muffled man's body suddenly woke despite the sedatives trying to keep him under! Ves didn't care as he recognized he succeeded in cutting away at least eighty percent of the pirate's spiritual potential.

The test subject's self-defense mechanism hadn't been on guard! It activated too late!

Unfortunately, this was not enough to achieve the result. While the test subject's remaining spiritual potential had lost a huge amount of strength, it still remained intact!

"Damn! I should have cut off more!"

Perhaps it might be interesting to study what happened to people who heavily damaged their spiritual potential. Ves wasn't interested, though. He commanded the spiritually-injured test subject to be moved back to the brig while calling up yet another test subject.

"I'm running out of captives to experiment upon." He muttered. "I don't have that many of them in the first place."

It took two more cutting attempts before Ves successfully managed to cripple a test subject's spiritual potential!

Ves estimated that he had cut off 95 percent of his latest test subject's spiritual potential. What remained no longer possessed the strength to retain its distinctive characteristics. What remained retracted into a seed that was so weak and tiny that Ves could hardly sense it in the first place.

His eyes lit up as the poor pirate moaned in pain.

"Hahahaha!" Ves laughed. "This is it! This is what I wanted to see!"

While he hadn't managed to develop a method to imbue spiritual potential into someone who lacked it, he at least came up with a means to do the reverse.

The actual application of this technique was a little dubious, though. He couldn't perform this cruel technique at a distance. He needed to touch his target's head or find some other way to gain direct access without tripping any alarms. Then he needed to estimate how much he could cut without mind-killing his patient.

The limitations effectively meant that there was little chance for him to employ it effectively in battle.

"That's fine. I'm not asking for much."

Now that he transformed an unsuitable test subject into one that fulfilled all of his original criteria, he moved quickly.

Ves commanded some bots to bring the crippled test subject out of the testing chamber and into the mech workshop.

Even though the test subject was still suffering a lot of soul-searing pain, Ves couldn't wait. Once the pirate was locked onto the piloting chair, Ves commanded the Desolate Soldier to boot up and interface with its unwilling mech pilot.

The outcome surprised him. Minutes passed as the mech successfully interfaced with its mech pilot.

"Mmwmmwef! Mfemwmfemfe!"

The current test subject still exhibited a lot of signs of pain, but the mech wasn't actually inducing that much stress against its own user. The test subject's lack of sensitivity towards further spiritual attacks limited what the mech could do against the pirate.

"Interesting!"

This meant that those without spiritual potential were actually a bit more capable of resisting dangerous spiritual pressure!

Ves found it rather ironic that the weakest mortals possessed an advantage in this aspect. The lucky ones who developed spiritual potential had to guard their spirits well.

He began to perform a follow-up experiment. As the mech was still in use, Ves requested the Solemn Guardian to feed back a portion of its energy to the Desolate Soldier mech.

He wanted to find out the spiritual tolerance of someone without spiritual potential. How much pressure could his current test subject withstand before reaching his limit?

Quite high, it turned out.

As the mech continued to inflate with spiritual energy, the tortured test subject still managed to hold on to his life, though there were various signs that he would suffer permanent brain damage if this process proceeded for more than an hour.

Ves did not halt the process but continued to monitor the situation in multiple ways as the Desolate Soldier mech grew stronger.

"MMFMEW!"

The mech pilot finally succumbed when the mech had almost reached saturation! Ves looked closely at both the telemetry and spiritual activity and concluded that the test subject's small and crippled spirit finally succumbed.

The man suffered a mind death, the same as the second test subject.

"At least there isn't a mess this time."

As the bots began to remove the mentally-dead pirate from the cockpit, Ves began to wrap up this round of experiments. He didn't want to waste his remaining test subjects without going over his current results.

This was a fruitful day to Ves. He developed several new concepts such as lethal threshold and spiritual tolerance. He also came up with three more spiritual techniques that he could add to his expanding toolbox.

Spiritual foundation enhancement was a method of empowering the spiritual foundation of individual mechs. It was also reversible if not too much time had passed.

As the experiments had already shown, spiritual foundation enhancement was very potent but dangerous. Most mech pilots couldn't withstand the consequences of interfacing with excessively powerful mechs if there was any hostility between the two. Mech pilots with spiritual potential had to be extra careful against threats from this direction!

So far, Ves had only seen the downsides of spiritual foundation enhancement. Yet he wasn't quite sure what happened if an empowered mech couldn't kill its own mech pilot.

Would such a mech truly be able to grow faster than if it hadn't been fed with a large amount of spiritual energy?

It was difficult to know for sure, especially if he kept pairing pirate mech pilots with an upright mech like the Desolate Soldier.

"Do I really need to turn one of my own Larkinsons into my test subjects?"

#### *Chapter 2340: Drooping Tree*

Subjecting his own clansmen to his experiments was a step too far to Ves.

He struggled with his desire to extend his current study to his own clansmen. Even if he weakened the spiritual foundation of his test mech to a large degree, he still couldn't rule out the possibility that something detrimental might take place.

The last thing he wanted to do was to cripple a valuable Larkinson mech pilot!

Every single member of the clan was family to him. He was unwilling to expose any of his Larkinsons to this kind of danger so soon after leading hundreds of them to their deaths. The Battle of Ulimo Citadel had already killed enough brave mech pilots.

As Ves stared at the empowered Desolate Soldier, he began to develop some misgivings about the machine.

A sense of bloodiness emanated from the machine. The mech had killed its own mech pilots not just once, but thrice!

With this bloody track record, Ves was afraid the mech had acquired a taste for blood.

Two mech pilots with spiritual potential and one without had already fallen victim to this deadly machine. Sure, much of the reason why the mech resisted its own mech pilots was because the two were incompatible.

According to his current theories, it should be safe for any Larkinson to pilot this machine. The Desolate Soldier mech may have returned to its peak, but it was unlikely to exhibit any hostility towards compatible mech pilots.

Yet even if Ves weakened the mech, he wasn't sure whether it was a good idea to send it back to the Sentinels.

The more he looked at the mech, the more he felt he created a monster. His intuition didn't sense much good in keeping it around.

Though he wanted every mech of his to live a good life, some would only spread misery if kept in use. As much as he wanted to keep the mech around, Ves didn't want any of his mech pilots to inadvertently hop into its cockpit during an emergency.

"Sorry mech, but I can't keep you around anymore. You're a menace to society."

Ves reluctantly commanded the mech be brought away to one of the logistics ships of his fleet. The mech had to be scrapped.

Once a crew came to take the pilot-killing mech away, Ves contemplated his subsequent steps.

He still hadn't achieved his original goal. The entire point of these experiments was to figure out a way to accelerate the growth of his mechs. While he believed that performing a limited degree of spiritual foundation enhancement had great potential, he was troubled by the fact that he was unable to test it without potentially harming someone.

Considering the current circumstances, it was not appropriate to stuff his captive pirates into mechs and hope that something happened.

"Wait a minute. Do I have to enact this change to someone within my reach?"

Not necessarily. The most important step was inducing a design spirit to perform spiritual foundation enhancement. If he wanted to do so, he could ask the Solemn Guardian to donate some of its spiritual energy to a couple of the many millions of Desolate Soldiers in active use!

No one would know the affected mechs had changed. Their mech pilots would probably utilize the machine the same as before. Ves would only have to wait a month or so before checking back on the results.

The only difficulty he had with this course of action was that it was rather difficult to keep track of an empowered mech by remote.

In order to obtain the most comprehensive results, Ves needed to access both the mechs and mech pilots in person to gather as much data as possible. He couldn't resort to any other option if he wanted to study the spiritual changes of the affected mechs and people.

Therefore, affecting random people throughout the star sector didn't happen. He needed to perform his experiment on someone closer to home.

How could he do so without attracting any suspicion?

Ves didn't have a habit of personally approaching the existing customers of his own works. He didn't really need to hear their praise when he could already obtain it from the galactic net.

"Wait a minute! There is at least one member of the clan who I don't care about!"

How could he forget about Vincent Ricklin? Ves never wanted him to join the clan in the first place. If not for Raella persuading the recruiters to make an exception, this former rebel and enemy would have never become a Larkinson!

Ves contacted Bravo and easily persuaded him to donate some of his spiritual energy to the Adonis Colossus. With Vincent's vanity, he was sure to pilot his personal mech on a regular basis.

The only issue was that Bravo was one of his weakest design spirits. Ever since Ves created him, Bravo only bonded with a single mech pilot. Ves hadn't seen fit to reuse him in his other mech designs.

Even so, the strength of a design spirit was still greater than that of a mech. They were inherently different existences and couldn't be compared at the start.

Performing this experiment on Vincent and the Adonis Colossus was a good idea for multiple reasons.

First, the Adonis Colossus was tailor-made for Vincent. The chances of rejection were some of the lowest possible out of all of the possible pairings between his products and his customers.

There was a high chance that Ves would see fantastic results once he returned to civilized space and observed Vincent and the Adonis Colossus in person. In the meantime, he could access the Larkinson Clan's own monitoring system at Cinach VI to observe Vincent and his mech without interruption.

If he wanted to, Ves could probably watch a feed of Vincent showering or washing his body!

He coughed. "Not that I want to. I am not curious at all. Nope."

Of course, Ves couldn't rule out that empowering the Adonis Colossus might produce an unexpected accident, but he wouldn't shed a tear if Vincent somehow ended up brain damaged or something.

Second, Vincent did not possess spiritual potential as far as Ves knew. This meant that his tolerance against any dangerous spiritual attacks should be fairly high.

For this reason, Ves commanded Bravo to bleed a significant amount of spiritual strength into the Adonis Colossus. He wanted the mech to reach fifty percent saturation, which was slightly dangerous to people with spiritual potential but still very tolerable to those who were weaker!

A spiritual dull mech pilot like Vincent would only experience some pressure, and that should only happen if he somehow pissed off his own mech!

It was these mech pilots that Ves wanted to empower with his mechs the most. Those who were spiritually gifted already possessed their own opportunities to grow stronger. It was the lowest and most abundant type of mech pilots that Ves wanted to give a leg up with his legacy mechs.

As long as even the stupidest and most incompetent mech pilot was able to grow the mech he piloted into a complimentary life, then the power of these weak mech pilots might surprise the galaxy one day!

After Ves documented his actions and observations into his implant, he ended the long session and returned to his stateroom.

There, Lucky was moping about as always. This time, he moved to sofa, only to fall asleep while splayed over the armrest.

Ves approached his injured cat and carefully studied the wounds. They had grown a bit smaller before.

"Rest well, Lucky." He whispered.

At this time, the design lab had already emptied. His experiments took so long that it was already evening in standard time. Aside from the low humming that ran throughout his ship, his personal space was completely quiet.

Just as he thought about taking a bite of one of the new Ulimo nutrient packs that Ketis had gifted to him, he suddenly paused.

"This.."

Ves stood up from his desk chair and approached the display that held some of his sentimental possessions. He briefly grinned at the mug that depicted him in his Devil Tongue visage before turning towards a very small tree.

To be honest, Ves hadn't studied the little tree at all. For a very long time, the tree largely remained the same. If not for noticing how it grew a couple of millimeters by comparing its length against how it looked in the past, he would have thought his grandfather scammed him somehow!

"According to grandpa, it's supposed to be a prosperity tree that grows according to how much luck or success its owner enjoys."

He received it a very long time ago during his thirtieth birthday celebration at Cloudy Curtain. Back then, Ves was just a recently-advanced Journeyman. The Larkinson Clan didn't exist at that time.

Ever since then, Ves and his newly-founded clan went on to grow meteorically. At this time, Ves and his fellow clansmen wouldn't be able to recognize themselves a year ago! So much had changed for the better that the prosperity tree should have grown more drastically if it really did as advertised!

"Is my tree defective?!"

Ves tapped his finger against the tree's gnarly surface. It looked a lot more droopier than it should. In fact, if he didn't know any better, the tree looked like it was about to die!

"What the hell? Has it reached the end of its lifespan? That shouldn't be possible! This is supposed to be a young tree!"

While he couldn't be bothered with watering the prosperity tree and refreshing its soil, he had already obtained a gardener bot to perform this chore a lot better than he could have accomplished.

"Yesterday, this stupid tree looked the same as always."



Ves keenly remembered that the plant featured vigorously green leaves and strong branches. Now, those leaves had darkened and greyed a bit while its branches became as feeble as the arms of an old granny.

He scratched his head. He tried to inspect it through his spiritual vision, but the plant didn't really possess any. This was also one of the other reasons why Ves thought his grandfather had scammed him. How was the tree supposed to grow according to his level of 'prosperity' if not through the most obvious means?

Regardless, the fact that his tree suddenly looked like it was about to croak gave Ves a very bad feeling.

"This..."

As much as he wanted to dismiss the tree's strange behavior as a product defect, he couldn't help but fear that it might be an indicator of something more.

While Ves puzzled over what was actually going on, a chime sounded in the compartment.

He had a visitor.

As soon as Ves commanded the hatch to open, Calabast stormed in with an alarmed expression on his face.

She did not look calm and poised as usual!

"I have some very bad news, Ves!"

"Tell me. What is "

"The Allidus Alliance are hunting us down!"

What?!

"As far as I know, their main elements are all supposed to be in the core regions. Even if they set off to hunt us down right away, the chance they'll be able to catch up with us is low. Our task force isn't slow!"

"You're wrong, Ves. The Allidus Alliance isn't chasing after us from the core regions. One of their punitive fleets took some sort of secret space channel that instantly transported it to Wreckage Paradise. Don't you realize what this means? As long as the pirates can track our coordinations, the Allidus Alliance can preemptively cut off our escape route! The enemy pirate fleet can block every possible exit we want to take!"

This time, Ves did not dismiss the threat anymore. While he wasn't sure whether the prosperity tree's abrupt drooping was related to this development, this wasn't good!

"Is there anything else, Calabast?"

"The Allidus Alliance has also called upon its local pirate allies to harass or hinder us while keeping us under observation." She said. "While I doubt that any local pirate group is willing to sacrifice themselves against us, some of them might be stupid enough to try something. Expect plenty of traps to hinder our path forward."

This was truly bad news!