

Mech 2371

Chapter 2371: Power of Will

What was willpower?

There were a lot of official definitions of this term, but few of them described the concept that matched his current understanding of this term.

Willpower was intent. Willpower stood for the willingness to endure hardships. Willpower kept warriors aloft in battle.

To Ves, willpower took on even more meaning after personally witnessing expert candidates and expert pilots in battle. Even without seeing them in action, those with strong will such as Venerable Brutus and Venerable Jannzi already distorted the reality around them with their latent will alone!

Yet what these amazing individuals accomplished was not purely a product of willpower. Expert pilots only emerged after they unconsciously developed their spiritual power by merging it with their strong wills.

For some reason, no other people except strong-willed mech pilots were able to accomplish this odd and very rare feat. Due to these strict conditions, the amount of expert pilots in any given state was actually quite low. It was no surprise that the MTA imposed many rules favorable to high-ranked mech pilots in order to preserve their lives outside of mech combat.

He turned his attention back to James. This religious bastard did not even bother to hide his paternal expression. Even though the Living Prophet smiled politely as he awaited an answer, to Ves the clone looked incredibly smug!

Ves wanted to punch this smug look off the bastard's face!

Sadly, Ves had to abide by the decorum that was expected of a clan leader. James hadn't done anything that merited a good whack.

As the only person who possessed actual knowledge and insight on the mysterious phenomenon known as spirituality, James played a vital role in the clan. Several times now, the self-proclaimed reborn prophet had provided essential wisdom and insight.

How could Ves possibly do something as shortsighted as spoiling his relationship with the former cult leader?

Emotionally, Ves wanted to beat James up.

Rationally, he wanted to retain the man as a spiritual consultant and advisor.

Emotion and reason warred within Ves, but eventually the latter achieved a decisive victory.

Enough time had passed for Ves to reorganize his thoughts and form an answer in his own words.

"Willpower is a form of power that comes from the mind. To ordinary people, it is a quality that allows them to persevere temporary difficulties to achieve a greater payoff. To expert pilots, it is one of their strongest traits and allows them to fully leverage the other powers."

"That is a good interpretation." James nodded in satisfaction. "The power of thought and the power of will are highly similar. Which one do you think is stronger?"

Ves frowned. He felt as if there was a trap behind those words. Even so, he decided to answer according to his own understanding.

"The power of will can achieve great feats when it is blended with the power of thought, but on its own it is largely formless. Just like our other thoughts and emotions, it can only affect our behavior."

"That is only what you think. Tell me, Ves. Have you ever seen an ace pilot? Have you ever had the fortune to meet a god pilot?"

Ves sneered. "I don't think you have ever seen those people either."

The current James was just a designer baby grown from the Prophet's genes. The past James was the founder of a cult in an age where mechs and mech pilots hadn't been invented yet. How could this smug bastard ever come in touch with a god pilot under these circumstances?

Despite the acid remark, James showed no irritation. His charming smile remained as radiant as ever.

"Willpower existed before the Age of Mechs, Ves. Back then, certain humans and aliens have already made use of the power of thought and the power of will. It is only after the emergence of mechs that the latter has become more ubiquitous."

"What is your point and what does this have to do with the battle networks I'm trying to develop?" Ves impatiently asked.

The prophet held up a hand. "Patience, please. Understanding the power of will is essential to your future endeavors. Now, think about it. Mech designers such as you mainly advance by developing the power of thought. I am sure you have met with a number of Master Mech Designers. What do you sense when you meet them in person?"

"Power. Pure power." Ves spoke as he recalled the times when he met with both Master Olson and Master Willix. "It is as if they evolved their thoughts to such a high degree that it has solidified into a physical substance. I have sensed something similar from other comparable entities such as Qilanxo."

"She is a magnificent being, if a bit uncultured. Nonetheless, she is not only powerful, but also well-versed in the application of her power. That is quite admirable for a god of her age." James complimented the sacred god. "However, you have made one mistake. Powerful mech pilots are not comparable to the likes of Qilanxo."

"Huh?"

"Expert pilots are defined by their will. The stronger their will, the greater their ability to exercise their unique abilities in combat. Without a sufficiently strong will, it doesn't matter how much they have cultivated the power of thought."

While Ves could buy that, he wondered where the role of spirituality came in. After all, the force of will that expert pilots used to resonate with their mechs was a product of both willpower and spiritual energy!

"If that is the case, why don't mech pilots rely on pure willpower and leave the power of thought alone?" He asked.

James smiled wider. "Ah, that is the great secret. Fortunately for you, I believe you are qualified to know this. Let me put it this way. When you are young, can you study a lot of books and develop into a competent mech designer all by yourselves?"

"No. Not realistically. Unless I have the enhancements that I have now, I wouldn't have been able to get where I am today if I did not benefit from structural teaching and guidance from the professors at the Rittersberg University of Technology."

Even though it was a fairly low-ranked academic institution for raising mech designers, Ves truly benefited a lot from learning there. Even if few of its graduates went on to become successful entrepreneurs, many of his former classmates were still able to land very good jobs at the military, the government or the design departments of various mech companies.

"It is the same when it comes to the power of will." James stated. "Earlier, you remarked that the power of will is formless and unable to achieve anything powerful on its own. You aren't wrong, but that is only when it is in its weaker stages. As long as you develop it further, the power of will becomes more and more amazing. At the end..."

"At the end?"

The Living Prophet teasingly smiled at Ves. "You get god pilots."

"What?!" Ves almost stood from his chair. "Are you saying that god pilots are able to contend against battleships with just their will and mech alone? What about the power of thought?!"

"Ah, god pilots have no need for it anymore." James dismissively waved his hand.

This was a huge revelation to Ves! The difference between high-ranking mech pilots and high-ranking mech designers turned out to be bigger than he thought!

He composed himself. "Explain to me how mech pilots develop themselves. What happens after they advance to expert pilots?"

"What I said before is already all the information you need to answer your own question, Ves. Someone like you is unable to become a mech designer without going through structure learning or personal guidance. The same goes for willpower. It is weak in its earlier stages and cannot bring many advantages to mech pilots. That is why they must meld it with the power of thought."

Ves felt as if he came in contact with a profound truth. If James wasn't spinning nonsense to him, then this was probably one of the biggest secrets behind high-ranking mech pilots!

"The combination is more powerful than the separate components, right? I always thought that this combined force is the main reason why expert pilots and such are so powerful. Am I wrong?"

"No. Your information is just incomplete. While it is correct when you limit your sights to expert pilots, it is a different story for ace pilots and god pilots. Expert pilots must use the power of thought to nurture their will. At this stage in their development, their will alone is stronger than normal people, but not impressive enough to achieve anything drastic in battle. That is why they must use the power of thought as a carrier."

"What about ace pilots?"

"Ah, when an expert pilot is able to surpass a threshold in the development of their will, they enter a new realm. The power of will begins to take on a greater proportion while the power of thought becomes more and more unimportant. Once the will of an ace pilot has reached a certain level of maturity, the power of thought becomes a shackle rather than a growth vessel."

This! Ves couldn't even get a grip on all of the implications of these revelations! He never realized that ace pilots progressed in this manner!

"What happens after that?" He huskily asked.

He wanted to know the truth!

"The student must surpass the teacher. When the power of thought is no longer able to provide any further help, the ace pilot must continue to develop will to the point that they are able break their power of thought and shatter the final barrier that prevents them from reigning supreme by will alone!"

"That sounds insane! The power of thought is intrinsic to every sentient lifeform! Without it, there is no life!"

Even the weakest humans or sentient animal possessed a tiny mote of spirituality. This single quality distinguished them from non-sentient life forms that weren't truly aware of themselves such as AIs and clones!

"It does sound implausible when you assume the power of thought is indispensable to life." James agreed. "This is why god pilots are so amazing. Their wills are so unfathomably strong that they are able to substitute the power of thought in their minds! They are living wills incarnate and have become entirely different! They cannot be called human anymore. It is not a mistake to call them gods."

"Is this.. What the Ylvainan Faith claims will happen to everyone in the future?"

"Oh no." James shook his head. "There are multiple paths to power. The cultivation of willpower is just one of them. You and I are following different paths. It doesn't matter that we are different from mech pilots. As they say, all roads lead to Rubarth. Just like how there are different professions, there are also different kinds of gods."

Ves paused for a while. He had to process what he heard.

If James was right, then the force of will gained by expert pilots was only a transitional product. It was temporary. The goal of forming a force of will was to prop up the immature willpower with spiritual energy. As these mech pilots advanced to higher ranks, they constantly needed to grow and transform their wills by using spiritual energy as a crutch.

It was only at the end when senior ace pilots reached their limits that they were ready to break their crutch! They had to shatter one of the key powers that made them alive and sustain their lives entirely by their superior will alone!

To Ves, this sounded as absurd as an unarmed human trying to fight a mech! It was impossible unless the human modified his body extensively to the point of becoming a deadly monster!

So much could go wrong through this arduous process. How could spirituality that was supposedly essential to all life be so easy to discard?

By far, most humans who tried to fight a mech with their bare hands would unquestionably die!

Only those who were freakish enough to develop their wills to insane heights were able to achieve this impossibility!

"No wonder why there are so few god pilots in the galaxy." Ves dazedly muttered. "With such an insanely difficult hurdle at the end, they are truly worthy of their titles!"

Chapter 2372: Myriad Powers

Though James could have been spinning a tale of nonsense, Ves did not believe this was the case.

The revelations on the power of will largely conformed to his own observations.

It was just that Ves was still too clueless about ace pilots and god pilots to know how important it was for them to develop their willpower.

The end goal of every mech pilot who wanted to reach the top was to evolve their will to a height that allowed them to live on it. To Ves who constantly gained a greater appreciation of spirituality, this sounded like a completely alien means of ascension!

Ves had to take a fair amount of time to take stock. Though he still disliked James, he had to admit that his spiritual advisor was definitely earning his keep in the clan!

"Earlier, you said that we are different from the mech pilots who develop their wills. What role does the power of will play for us? Also, aren't you supposed to be a mech pilot?"

"To answer the latter, I am, but that does not mean I have to follow the same path as every other mech pilot." James calmly answered. "Though it may seem unimaginable to the likes of you and every other mech-crazed citizen of human civilization, I am not particularly interested in becoming an existence that is sustained by will alone. My talents lie elsewhere."

Oh, Ves could believe that. James hadn't piloted a single mech during this excursion. Just like any cult leader, the Living Prophet excelled at scamming and hoodwinking people!

"As to how mech designers differ from mech pilots, well, that is something you can figure out yourself, Ves. Both god pilots and star designers are immensely powerful. They are gods in human form, but they express their might differently. To put it into terms that you are accustomed to, they have pursued different specialities."

"I see. Then what makes mech designers special, exactly? Are we dependent on the power of will as well?"

"No. While I have some insights on how mech designers reach greater heights, I am not one of them myself. I believe it is better for you to explore this on your own. All I can say is that unlike mech pilots, mech designers take the more common path of developing their power of thought. Just because mech pilots must eventually get rid of it doesn't mean it is useless. Willpower is just more suited to their roles."

Ves scratched his head again. He had been doing this several times as he struggled to understand all of the implications of what James was saying.

Right now, he felt awfully envious at mech pilots for being able to develop their willpower into something amazing. Ves felt rather lacking that he wasn't doing something like that.

Was cultivating willpower something exclusive to mech pilots and potentates? What stopped Ves from doing something similar? Was it truly possible for a single human being to cultivate both willpower and spirituality to their highest forms.

The Living Prophet seemed to know what Ves was thinking. "Don't think about it, Ves. I told you earlier that when ace pilots reach the threshold of their upper growth, their power of thought has become a hindrance. Do you really want to spend the effort to grow both powers, just so that you have to shatter one of them? Also, don't think that mech designers can casually develop their power of will on the side. Your minds are wired differently when you reach the rank of Journeyman."

That was a pity. Ves thought that his remarkably high control and perception of spirituality would allow him to do what others could not, but evidently there were hard limits.

Perhaps he could force it, but Ves had no ambitions to develop the power of will at the cost of compromising his mech design ability. What would he do with strong willpower if he couldn't even pilot a mech? It was completely counterproductive!

He recalled the reason why he summoned James in the first place. As much as he wanted to explore these novel aspects in greater detail, it would be pointless if Task Force Predator failed to overcome the intercepting pirate fleet.

"Let's get back to my original question. I asked you how a battle network would be different if I centered it around an expert pilot instead of an entity like the Superior Mother. How does the inclusion of willpower affect this dynamic?"

James tapped his fingers against the surface of the desk. "Gods like Qilanxo and the Superior Mother sustain themselves by cultivating their power of thought. As for expert pilots, the power of thought is merely an enabler to their power of will. Now, let us consider your so-called battle network. What do you think the mech pilots who are caught in this web prefer. The combination of will and thought or just the power of thought?"

When put in this way, the answer sounded obvious.

"Mech pilots don't seem to have much use for the power of thought in isolation. Standard mech pilots have developed neither powers. Just gaining the power of thought alone is not that helpful if their will remains weak."

Maybe that was why the efficiency of the Penitent Sister battle formations was so low. The Superior Mother may be powerful from a spiritual standpoint, but she did not do anything to enhance the wills of the mech pilots connected to her crown.

Perhaps this was also why most of the mech pilots weren't able to persist for a longer time. The demands on their feeble wills was simply too much.

This made Ves wonder if adding an expert pilot, whether they used as the central focus of a battle network or merely one of its participants could make a substantial difference.

"Is it possible for expert pilots to share their power of will to the other mech pilots in the network?" Ves asked.

James smiled but did not provide a direct answer. "I cannot say. You are the inventor of battle networks. You should know better than I about this subject. What does your logic say?"

"I think.. the asymmetrical neural network that has propelled my cousin Ghanso to fame is proof that the power of will can be shared."

The only question was how compatible the other mech pilots would need to be in order to sync up with the expert pilot. The requirements must be extremely strict. So strict in fact that Ves actually wanted to know how Master Huron prepped the mech pilots that fought alongside Venerable Ghanso.

"Whatever you do, don't underestimate the power of will." James warned Ves with a serious tone. "Expert pilots have cultivated their willpower with the help of their power of thought, but the same can't be said for other mech pilots. What is the nature of will?"

"Belief in self. Perseverance. Intent." Ves summed up his previous answer.

"Now try and imagine transplanting these will components to another person's mind. Do you think that this will go well?"

"..Maybe not. In the worst-case scenario, the expert pilot might turn the other mech pilots in the battle network into her copies."

Whether this was good or bad depended on how much he cared about the weaker mech pilots.

From a rational standpoint, turning different mech pilots into carbon copies of expert pilots sounded like a great deal! As long as Ves was willing to lose the individual personalities of the mech pilots in questions, he would be able to gain a lot of mech pilots who possessed similar traits as that of an expert pilot!

Still, despite the great attraction of this development, Ves would never allow this to happen to his own clansmen! He and his clan valued their individual wellbeing. Overriding their wills with the will of another person was no better than suffering mind death!

"Your worries may be unfounded, Ves." James added. "Expert pilots have great control over the power of will. If they do not wish to inadvertently cause harm to their comrades, then they just need to restrain themselves."

"That is a relief. If my battle network can only be utilized by standard mech pilots, then much of its potential is lost. That would be a great shame."

The two spiritually-enlightened individuals spoke some more about battle networks and willpower. Ves wanted to obtain a bit more clarification so that he did not develop any wrong ideas about what he had just learned.

Of course, as wise and all-knowing as James appeared, Ves constantly reminded himself that this fellow wasn't entirely trustworthy. So far, he only learned about the power of will from a single, obviously biased source. A source that definitely held ulterior motives.

Ves would be a fool to believe in James just because he sounded authoritative over this subject!

As a researcher, Ves always possessed the urge to verify what he discovered. When it came to something as vital and hidden as willpower, he had to be extra careful and know for sure that the theories he gained were accurate.

If he made any mistakes, he might spark off a disaster when he was ready to implant a battle network in Commander Dise!

The two men began to wrap up their discussion.

"Is there anything else I should take into account when I make my next battle network?" Ves earnestly asked.

"I do have something I wish to say, though it is not necessarily related to your current endeavors."

"Then say your piece."

James took a slow breath. "There are more forms of power than just the two I have mentioned. Just like how most of humanity has discovered how to harness kinetic energy, thermal energy, electrical energy, gravitational energy and so on in the form of technology, there are many more expressions of power that are less accessible. Some are only found in aliens. Others are more easy to access. The power of thought just happens to be the most universal power to individuals like you and me. We are blessed in that regard."

Ves was inclined to believe this. There was so much that he and humanity were still ignorant of. Reality was much more grand than anyone could ever imagine. Just the Milky Way Galaxy alone still hid countless secrets that could revolutionize the way people lived.

"Noted. Is there anything else?"

"Hmmm. We live in the Age of Mechs. Any power that is conducive to mechs is in vogue now. That does not mean that other expressions of power have become extinct."

"How did people strengthen their will before mechs?" Ves suddenly asked.

He had been wondering about this for a while now. He didn't think it came out of nowhere.

"That is something for you to explore for yourself." James grinned. "I'll leave you with a hint. We humans are actually defective in this aspect. Most life in the galaxy is defective when it comes to cultivating their willpower."

"What?"

That was quite a negative-sounding statement!

"You heard me, Ves. We humans are weak in developing our willpower. Although it sounds harsh, it is not untruthful to describe us as defective. A more ideal form of life should be capable of developing a much stronger will and sense of self. We humans are far from reaching this standard. We are like cripples who have to rely on external aid such as hover chairs to move around."

Ves looked scandalized! Equating heroic high-ranking mech pilots as paralyzed cripples who weren't able to move without a tool was a pretty radical statement to make!

If James ever uttered this description in the midst of a group of mech pilots, he would have instantly been beaten black and blue for his temerity!

Even though Ves merely admired expert pilots, he too felt that James had gone far. Perhaps the Living Prophet was making a factually truthful statement. That did not mean he should phrase it in the most pejorative method possible!

"I don't agree with your tone." Ves replied with a restrained smile. "Humanity has always relied on external tools to achieve greatness. We are married to technology, and there is nothing to feel ashamed about that. Mech pilots are not burdened by mechs. They are enriched by mechs. This is what I believe!"

Chapter 2373: Shocking Implication

Long after James left his stateroom, Ves remained in deep thought as he repeatedly analyzed everything he heard and inferred.

His spiritual adviser certainly lived up to his unofficial title. James Ylvaine was truly a font of knowledge when it came to the more mysterious side of reality.

"What a troublesome parting shot. Is he trying to ruin my impression of expert pilots?"

Clearly, James expressed his contempt for high-ranking mech pilots several times. It was as if they were somehow worse than those who pursued different paths to power.

Despite the great temptation to take everything that James said at his word, Ves couldn't bring himself to do so. The final remark especially compelled Ves to make a stand and refute what his advisor had claimed.

To Ves, expert pilots and higher weren't poor or crippled. Everyone relied on external tools and aid these days in order to do their jobs. Human civilization was practically defined by its extensive and ubiquitous use of technology to accomplish feats that were impossible to accomplish with human power alone!

After all, great feats such as constructing Dyson spheres around suns, terraforming lifeless rocks into life bearing planets and crossing the stars could never be done without the use of lots of vehicles and technological inventions.

Even a mech designer like Ves depended extensively on technology to propagate more technology. Didn't the criticism espoused by James apply to him as well? Was this the Living Prophet's veiled way of dissing his current path of progression?

"You bastard!"

Ves should feel happy. He not only learned a lot about a subject that he depended heavily upon, but he also solved many of his doubts and uncertainties with regards to his battle network.

Yet some of the implications that James alluded to added additional burdens to his mind. He felt haunted by some of the more unsettling theories and guesses he formed.

"Are mech pilots, and by extension mech designers, really crippled and overly dependent on external tools?"

He didn't think so. Ves was a mech designer. He was part of a greater society that depended entirely on tools to gain superiority over the rival alien empires that used to dominate the galaxy.

"Human civilization is an empire of tool users." Ves muttered. "The Seven Apex Races and many other alien civilizations used to lord it over us because of their inborn strengths and endowments. Now look at them. We've displaced them entirely from the most prosperous and juiciest parts of the galaxy. Many of their former empires have gone to ruin and all of their monuments and traces have disappeared."

He believed that the views espoused by James were more sympathetic towards the Five Scrolls Compact than the Big Two. This alone caused Ves to inherently reject the views espoused by the clone.

"I could use a bite."

Ves didn't bother standing up in order to eat a meal at the mess hall. Neither did he bother to call a chef to deliver a hand cooked meal to him. Why should he go through all of that trouble when he had plenty of food within arm's reach.

He opened one of his drawers, revealing a messy heap of nutrient packs. Ves picked up one of them and looked appreciatively at the label.

"These Ulimo nutrient packs are certainly unique. If my ships had the room, I would have packed up their nutrient processing plant and taken it back."

Perhaps the Larkinson Clan should look into producing its own nutrient packs.

"Nah." Ves put down the suggestion as he tore open the wrapper. "The nutrient pack sector is one of the most oversaturated markets in human space."

He dug out the small spoon that was embedded in the folds of the wrapper and began to spoon the dry, dense concentration of nutrients. As soon as he swallowed his first spoonful, his eyes lit up. His taste buds instantly came in touch with deep, rich flavors.

After spooning up a few more scoops, he immediately felt invigorated. A burst of energy refreshed his mind and eased his stress. He felt ready to work an entire week!

Once Ves finished his meal, he restored his hydration level by drinking a large glass of water.

"Ahhh!" He sighed in pleasure. "I needed that."

Taking a break and eating a hearty nutrient pack completely reset his mind. Now that he had taken a step back, he no longer felt as troubled as before.

"Who cares what he thinks?" Ves huffed. "I chose to be a mech designer. My job is to serve mech pilots by providing them with the best tools for the job. Is there anything wrong with this? Just because I can't become like my mother doesn't mean I'm inferior!"

He was not jealous of his mother and her extensive mastery over spiritual manipulation!

Whatever James thought about mech pilots was only relevant to himself. The rest of the Larkinson Clan largely centered around mechs. Both its mech pilots and its mech designers were vital to its future might and prosperity.

In the Age of Mechs, this was a winning combination!

"Making use of mechs is even better than relying on yourself. As long as mechs are alive, the combination of human and mech can achieve fantastic synergy that can rival the entities who pretend they are gods!"

The previous battle was a fantastic example of this. At the very end when the Unending One was about to unleash his wrath, Venerable Jannzi, her mech and Qilanxo all combined forces to crush the ancient alien horror!

Alone, the three probably weren't capable of defending against the Unending One. Together, they had the potential to overturn the entire galaxy!

"My design philosophy centers around symbiosis. By nature, my research and ambition is all about combining different elements together in order to accomplish a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. I can't do much with a single part."

Ves felt more sure of himself after he made this realization.

He shoved this matter aside and returned his attention to developing his second battle network. He tweaked his design for the battle network in order to account for willpower. If it was possible for Commander Dise to 'share' a portion of her willpower with her fellow Swordmaidens, then Ves wanted his battle network to facilitate this as much as possible.

He didn't change all that much, though. His second battle network may be narrower in scope, but Ves did at least distinguish it in one specific way.

Inspired by James' description of the power of will, Ves decided not to leave any room for any potential design spirits. The Swordmaidens were some of the most willful mech pilots in the Larkinson Clan. Even the normal Swordmaiden mech pilots possessed minds of steel.

Enhancing their performance with design spirits and glows would only clash against their martial tradition. They were used to being self-sufficient and relying on themselves.

Even if Ves intended to create a sword-oriented design spirit in the future, he didn't want his Swordmaidens to lose this intrinsic strength.

If the Penitent Sister battle network worked entirely on spiritual energy, the Swordmaiden network instead ran on force of will.

Ves added a few safeguards to his design, though he wasn't really sure how effective they would be. When it came to spiritual engineering, a lot of additions that Ves intended to add to his work ended up rather fuzzy. This was the inherent challenge of manipulating something that Ves wished to bring to life.

After a while, he felt satisfied with what he accomplished.

"It might not look much right now, but hopefully it will grow into power."

The next day, Ves shuttled over to the Jaded Sword in order to install his second battle network.

As soon as he arrived, Ketis enthusiastically greeted right outside his shuttle.

"Ves! You're here! Are you checking up on Commander Dise's custom mech?"

"Ah, I'm here for a different reason, but I might as well check up on your progress so far. How much have you changed?"

"Not a lot, but there are still some weeks to go. Let me show you the current state of the Sword Hunter."

"Sword Hunter?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"That's the name of the mech we worked on. Dise doesn't need any fancy names for her machine. She just wants a mech that is able to attack and move according to her expectations. She has already outpaced her current machine so she expects much from the Sword Hunter."

Even if Ketis made the current Sword Hunter perfect for Commander Dise, it might not last. If the Swordmaiden Commander ever managed to advance to expert pilot in the next battle, then the Sword Hunter would only momentarily be able to keep up due to the temporary outburst of resonance that accompanied the breakthrough.

After that, the mech would likely turn into a sluggish mule for an expert pilot such as her! Only an expert mech would be able to satisfy her from that point!

Once the pair of mech designers arrived at a mech workshop, Ves saw that the Swordmaidens had already disassembled much of the mech. Various Swordmaiden

mech technicians were in the process of replacing some of the internal components with higher-performing ones.

Ves instinctively reached out with his Spirituality in order to smooth over the many imperfections that was marring the mech's spiritual foundation.

The mech was already radiating with power. If any Swordmaiden mech pilot randomly entered the cockpit and tried to boot it up, she might actually die!

Only Commander Dise among the Swordmaidens possessed the strength to withstand the pressure extend by her own mech!

As Ves finished his task, he briefly reflected on what he had done.

"Mechs and mech pilots. Do they both rely on the same source of power?"

Mech pilots resonated with their mechs by utilizing their force of will. They needed to combine both their spiritual energy and willpower to produce a composite force that allowed them to wield greater power.

"What if.. the mech pilot doesn't have to supply these powers. What if they came from the mech?"

Wasn't this what he was already doing to an extent? His spiritual foundation enhancement attempts added a substantial amount of spiritual energy to the mech.

When a mech pilot interfaced with an enhanced mech, they essentially pooled their own spirituality with the spiritual foundation of their machine.

"They're like married couples!" Ves suddenly realized.

His outburst surprised Ketis for a moment, but as soon as she realized that he was having another epiphany, she dutifully kept quiet.

As for Ves, he was in the process of applying all of the insights he recently gained and combining them with his previous invention.

Right now, his spiritually-enhanced mechs possessed varying degrees of spiritual energy saturation.

Just like a man and wife, what belonged to the mech also belonged to the mech after they interfaced with each other.

Conversely, what belonged to the mech pilot should also belong to the mech in this situation!

Ves didn't think it was that simple, but if this outlandish theory matched reality, then the implications were profound!

If Ves somehow managed to imbue both spiritual energy and willpower into a mech, didn't that mean it had all the ingredients necessary to accomplish resonance?

It just needed a mech pilot to channel both kinds of power.

Was this a viable means of creating an expert mech without requiring a corresponding expert pilot?

Would he be able to bring an expert mech into existence that was just as strong as the real deal with just a regular mech pilot?

Ves was really shocked at his own realization! Something as radical as a standalone expert mech would completely subvert the entire mech industry!

There were so many mech pilots in the galaxy but few of them managed to advance to a higher rank. If Ves made it possible for normal mech pilots such as Melkor and Dietrich to make full use of an expert mech, then was it possible to make expert pilots redundant?

His body shivered.

Chapter 2374: Respa

The creation of a standalone expert mech sounded incredibly interesting to Ves. Theoretically, it should be possible, but in practice Ves would have to solve a lot of problems.

"This is probably something I should look into when I advance to Senior or Master." He muttered.

Aside from learning how to design expert mechs, Ves had to figure out how to impart willpower in a mech.

James mentioned that spiritual energy and willpower came from the same source. The first was more common and versatile while the latter was difficult to nurture and not so transferable.

Spiritual energy centered around thought and emotion. Willpower came from the self. This difference implied that transferring someone else's willpower onto a mech may not be viable.

Design spirits couldn't help. All of them were entirely based on spirituality and did not possess any exceptional willpower.

Perhaps theoretically, they might be able to nurture willpower through some unusual methods. Maybe they could even piggyback off his mechs to accomplish this feat.

However, at the end, the strengthening of willpower demanded the destruction of spirituality. Didn't that mean these spiritual entities had to kill themselves in order to turn into a lifeform composed entirely of willpower?

Ves believed it was a bit more realistic to encourage a living mech to develop a will. No matter what fortune or misfortune took place over the course of its evolution, every consequence would be confined to a single copy.

This was still a very distant prospect, however. Ves barely understood anything about the nature of the power of will. He only recognized it as a distinct source of power just recently.

For now, it was best to focus on his immediate problems rather than let his ambition run wild.

He turned his attention back to the Sword Hunter. For a converted Bright Warrior, Ketis was doing a good job transforming it into something unique. It might even be her first real variant design.

After discussing a number of issues about some of the trickier changes that Ketis wanted to implement, they eventually met with Commander Dise.

The strong Swordmaiden expert candidate and leader greeted Ves with a ramrod straight back and her feet planted solidly to the deck.

"Welcome to the Jaded Sword." The dark-skinned woman spoke as she gazed at her Sword Hunter. "Will you be giving us the same treatment as the Penitent Sisters?"

"Not exactly. The experiment that I wish to perform on your Swordmaidens is different in nature. Let's head somewhere private so I can explain some of the nuances to you. In order to make this work, I need your cooperation."

He knew that a Swordmaiden like Dise was not interested in the mechanics behind what he was trying to achieve. She mainly cared about the results. Therefore, he condensed and dumbed down his explanation as best as possible so that she knew just enough to know what she might be getting into. With something as new and unknown as this, the risks were considerable.

"Do I have your consent to proceed with my experiment?" Ves asked after he finished outlining his plan.

Commander Dise frowned. She turned to Ketis, who shrugged.

"Ves usually means well. I don't claim to know how this battle network will affect you and our other Sisters, but I think it is definitely useful. However, I'm concerned about a couple of details. This network is different from that of the Penitent Sisters."

He nodded. "The Penitent Sisters can easily sync up to each other by praying to the Superior Mother. You Swordmaidens are different. I think it is much more suitable for you in the long run if you stay true to your current heritage."

Commander Dise clenched her fist. "I agree! We Swordmaidens aren't in the habit of relying on others like weak women! We are more than capable of fighting our own battles!"

"This is why the battle network that I'm preparing for your troop won't center around a powerful entity that graciously does much of the heavy lifting. The Penitent Sisters may be strong in their own way, but their mentalities are too.. prone to submission."

This was what he disliked the most about the Penitent Sisters and any other group of religious nuts. While it was convenient for Ves to command them as long as he found the right handle, he ultimately believed it would have been better if they weren't so gullible.

The Swordmaidens, who survived and thrived in the brutal frontier, were much more sensible and guarded in this regard. They lived alongside numerous weird cults such as the Temple of Haatumak. They personally witnessed the depravity of all of the cults that for one reason or another had been chased out of civilized space.

Ves admired the independent mindset of the Swordmaidens. Even when they had joined the Larkinson Clan, they were still determined to cling to much of their old ways. They compromised just enough in order to fit into their new circumstances. Perhaps that might not be so good from an integration standpoint, but Ves cherished the diversity these women added to the clan.

It took some time before Commander Dise eventually agreed with the experiment.

"I trust Ketis and I trust you." She plainly said. "Our Swordmaidens truly need strengthening, and barring some new mechs this seems like the only way. From all accounts, the enemy we are about to face is so strong that my fellow Sisters can easily lose their lives in an instant. I don't want to see that happen."

"I can't guarantee that your Sisters will all make it out alive, but I can at least assure you that they'll be able to put up a greater fight."

After that, Ves proceeded with creating his new battle network.

First, he needed to add the capability to Commander Dise's spirit. This was a fairly delicate operation because she wasn't as strong as the Superior Mother.

Ves had to resort to using up a drop of life-prolonging treatment serum in order to create a living spiritual construct for Commander Dise.

This new construct was a hybrid between a battle network and a mind sword. It essentially tried to fulfill both functions at once.

Nothing went wrong. Ves already knew what to expect from creating his first mind sword and his first battle network. The only complications resulted from the fact he tried to merge two different roles into a single spiritual entity.

In order to accommodate all of the necessary functions, he built a multi-part spiritual greatsword. While its shape was largely identical to that of Ketis, it possessed its own unique touches.

When Ves finally relaxed his mind, he let out a deep breath. "It's done."

Commander Dise, who lay on a treatment surface, slowly began to rise up to her feet. "I feel.. As if my mind has become busier."

"You'll get used to it." Ketis spoke. "Your new sword intent is alive, just like mine! If it bothers you, then just tell it to be quiet. Don't let your sword run amok."

One of the principal lessons the Swordmaidens learned was to always maintain control over their swords. It didn't take much time before the Swordmaiden Commander quieted her own mind.

With Ketis present, Ves let her guide Commander Dise on how to handle her new gift.

"You should give it a name. It's alive, after all, and it will respond more readily to you if you call it out."

"You're right." Dise paused for a minute while she began to consider names. "I'm thinking of calling it Lydia, but our old commander wouldn't have wanted me to name my sword intent after her. I think I'll call it Respa."

Ketis shared a knowing look with the Swordmaiden Commander. Obviously, there was an inside story behind the name. It was none of his business, though. He suppressed his curiosity and clapped.

"Alright, seeing as you still need to get used to your new mindsword, I will leave you with Ketis. Tomorrow, we'll proceed with the experiment."

They conducted the experiment a day later after Ketis extensively taught Commander Dise how to manage the new addition in her mind.

They encountered a bit of difficulty because of their different professions. The way Ketis interacted with and made use of Sharpie was based around treating it as a living pet.

On the other hand, Commander Dise felt much more comfortable with wielding her mind sword directly. With her nascent force of will, she was able to resonate with her mind sword to a modest degree. Though she was very clumsy in controlling Respa, Ves figured that was mostly because she was just an expert candidate at the moment. Her force of will possessed no substance at this stage.

Once Ves gained enough confidence in Commander Dise's ability to keep her mind sword under control. They quickly commenced the experiment.

Ves first established some connections between a squad of regular Swordmaiden mech pilots and Respa. This went smoothly.

While Respa still remained active as a mind sword, her battle network aspect hadn't been activated yet. As long as this remained true, nothing flowed through the connections. At most, some of Dise's residual force of will might leak into her fellow mech pilots.

"Are all of you feeling okay? Tell me if there are any abnormalities."

The first batch of Swordmaiden mech pilots all shook their heads.

"If that's the case, then head to your mechs and wait your turn to deploy into space."

A squad of Swordmaiden mechs launched from the Jaded Sword. Commander Dise followed shortly after with her current mech.

Though it would have been interesting to see how her battle network interacted with the Sword Hunter, the mech was in no state to launch.

The experiment soon commenced. Just like before, Ves asked a group of Avatar mechs to spar with the Swordmaiden squad and put them under pressure.

This time, the Avatar mechs significantly held back in their attacks. Unlike the second-class mechs of the Penitent Sisters, the third-class mechs of the Swordmaidens were much more fragile.

Even so, being surrounded by forty hostile mechs at closer ranges imposed a very powerful psychological effect on the Swordmaiden test subjects.

It was easy to forget that they were taking part in a controlled test when their mechs were being pushed around like bully victims!

"Enough! We are not weak!"

Ves watched closely as Commander Dise finally managed to find out how to activate Respa's battle network functionality.

The Swordmaiden mech pilots began to feel odd as Commander Dise reached out to them. While they had trouble getting in sync with each other, the problem wasn't as bad as Ves initially feared.

Every Swordmaiden admired Commander Dise! She not only succeeded Commander Lydia as their leader, but had also advanced to expert candidate. Her superior skill, strength and battle acumen had long earned her the respect of all of her subordinates!

With such a heroic figure at the center of the battle network, the Swordmaiden test subjects finally managed to sync up with each other.

"It's happening!"

The mechs spontaneously moved into a distinctly narrow formation. Ves imagined that they were forming a large sword.

Unfortunately, the attempt seemed to fail. The mechs didn't radiate any form of radiance, so no energy silhouettes appeared. Their formation had no substance!

Ves shut down the experiment. "That's enough!"

Ketis and the other Swordmaidens manning the various consoles and workstations looked disappointed. They expected to witness a powerful burst of strength. Instead, their Sisters hadn't accomplished anything!

"Did something go wrong? Have we failed?" Ketis softly asked.

"Calm down. To be honest, I expected this result."

"What? You planned for us to fail?"

"Not like that." Ves hurriedly shook his head. "It is just that I haven't hooked up the network to a powerful energy source. How can something powerful emerge from nothing? Commander Dise isn't strong enough to power any formations."

"Then what is the point of this experiment? Were you stringing us along all this time?!"

"No! Look, this experiment may have failed, but the framework is still sound. I checked it myself. We just have to wait for the right opportunity for this battle network to show its value. I'm sure that it will give all of us a pleasant surprise once Commander Dise advances to expert pilot!"

As long as Commander Dise broke through in the upcoming battle, the effort and resources that Ves put into creating Respa would finally pay off! Ves was willing to bet his life on this outcome!

Chapter 2375: Self-Replenishment

Time flew by quickly after that. With the results he gained from creating his previous two battle networks, Ves encountered no complications when he formed a third battle network for the Battle Criers.

He did not bother with testing it, afraid that any hidden pirate scouts in the vicinity might observe what he had accomplished. Though the odds of that were frankly low, Ves could not afford to rule out this possibility.

"Keep what I've done for your boys under wraps." Ves said to Commander Cinnabar aboard the Ion Tracker. "If your battle formation works out the way I think it does, then you may be able to make a huge difference in the upcoming battle. What I require from you and your Battle Criers is to be ready when I call upon you. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir." The red-bearded leader replied and bumped his fist against his chest. "We are Kinners. We strive to obey you to the fullest extent!"

Ves smiled. "Good man. Out of everyone in the Larkinson Clan, I trust Kinners such as you and Nitaa the most. I hope that your people will never forsake me. As long as you do so, I will always watch out for your Kinners."

Commander Cinnabar was flattered by the appreciation shown by Ves, but he was also skeptical. "We are all part of the same clan now."

"Yes, but the contract that I have signed with you Kinners should still remain valid. You can be both Larkinsons and Kinners without resulting in major contradictions. Am I wrong?"

"I can think of a number of scenarios where our multiple loyalties can come into conflict."

"That is why I want to make sure that you know which one you should value."

"This..." Commander Cinnabar was well aware of the implications of those words. "This may be fine for our current generation of Kinners, but we don't want all of our children to be locked in this bond."

Ah, that was right. Ves recalled that the Kinners cared a lot about providing a better future for their children. It didn't matter if they signed away their own lives. As long as their offspring gained the opportunities that they never achieved, everything was acceptable!

He quickly made up a new policy. "While this isn't a big consideration in the short term, let us make an agreement on how to treat your descendants. Right now, what will happen when your children become adults?"

"They are free Larkinsons and Kinners."

"Will they join the Battle Criers and continue your tradition?"

Commander Cinnabar looked troubled. "Maybe. As a Larkinson, I would want them to join the Avatars or some other division within the Clan. As a Kinner, I don't want our way of life to become extinct among the Larkinsons. Who knows what might happen to the Kinner Tribe one day. If our tribe is annihilated, we may very well be the only group of Kinners left to carry on our traditions."

Personally, Ves thought that continuing a legacy that centered around the deplorable practice of legal slavery was abominable. Still, as long as he was the one who held the whip, he didn't want to lose this valuable asset!

"Each culture is unique, and some of them are worth preserving. I admire your people's dedication to fealty and service. You are some of the most sincere people in the Komodo Star Sector."

"Thank you, sir."

"While it is true that you are Larkinsons, it is a shame for you and your descendants to forget about your origins. How about this? Just raise your children normally. When they become adults and are ready to decide how they want to live their lives, just give them a choice. If they want to become a mech designer and work for the LMC, then they can do so if they qualify for the job. If they want to become a mech pilot for the Avatars, then that is also okay as long as they pass the requirements. However, if they want to follow the footsteps of their parents, then they should be given a chance to do so. Won't that be great?"

The Battle Crier Commander's eyes lit up. This actually sounded like a great idea to him! The children of his people would have plenty of choice on how to live their lives in the future if this was the case.

"This is a good arrangement! Most of our fellow Kinners will agree!"

"Good. We can discuss the details later and put it into another contract. What matters is that we don't have to rely on importing Kinners from your tribe or letting in more outsiders to expand your ranks."

If he ever got out of the Nyxian Gap, Ves planned to leave the Komodo Star Sector as soon as possible. He was really sick of his home star sector and wanted to leave his local troubles behind.

However, that would mean losing valuable access to some of the unique products of this region such as spiritually-active materials from the Nyxian Gap and human products in the form of diehard loyal Kinnners.

While Ves had no clue how to synthesize his own B-stones and P-stones, he did know how to produce more loyal bondsmen. Just letting them breed and indoctrinate their own offspring with their unique culture should be sufficient to keep his Battle Criers going for multiple generations.

This was very important to Ves! Their strong sense of loyalty had already made him valuable, but the new capabilities he intended to impart to them would make them even more vital to his many plans.

Best of all, Ves didn't have to do anything to encourage the Battle Criers to perpetuate their Kinner practices! The Kinner Tribe indoctrinated each of them to embrace their habit of selling themselves, and as good parents she should definitely pass on their values to the next generation!

Ves didn't mind if ten percent or even ninety percent of Kinner descendants chose to leave the Battle Criers. As long as at least some people remained behind, he would retain possession of a strong and distinctive unit of ultra-loyal clansmen who Ves could potentially entrust with all of his secrets!

After all, Nitaa had been with him for multiple years, silently guarding his back like a tall guard dog, and she had never once leaked anything to anyone. Ves knew because he personally bugged her combat armor. He knew everything she did, and if she ever aimed her weapon against his back with the safeties off, her rifle would automatically lock out and turn into a brick.

Frankly, Ves thought this precaution was excessive considering Nitaa's exemplary loyal service. Even without this precaution, Ves was still assured she wouldn't betray her trust. The same went for the Battle Criers who were crewing the Scarlet Rose.

As much as Ves wanted to trust the other Larkinsons such as the Avatars of Myth, he felt as if they were slowly growing out of his direct control.

Part of that was good because their growth would definitely benefit the clan as a whole.

Part of it was bad because this growth came at the expense of personal loyalty.

Well, he was fine with that. Though Melkor was the person who deserved the most credit for growing the Avatars of Myth into a formidable troop of elites, Ves felt like a proud parent for enabling their rise.

It was similar to how he viewed his mechs. He was proud of designing and producing them, but there was no way he wanted to retain them all. Once he sold them to his customers, what happened to them was none of his business anymore.

Ves and Commander Cinnabar discussed some other matters.

For example, while the leader of the Battle Criers was highly in favor of sustaining his mech force by allowing their children to take up the mantle of their parents, it would take a lot of years for their numbers to swell.

"The Sentinels, Avatars, Vandals and so on have suffered substantial losses in this campaign. However, their root is still intact, so they can easily grow new leaves by recruiting talented outsiders or clansmen. It's not that easy for us if we solely rely on internal replenishment."

"Are you asking me if you should recruit outsiders to bolster your ranks?" Ves guessed.

"Yes. We have accepted a number of outsiders such as Mr. Dietrich Kotz and a number of other foreign-born mech pilots. All of them have integrated nicely with our people. They are indistinguishable from our Kinner-born Battle Criers in most aspects. It's just..."

"Their loyalty isn't as ironclad, right?"

"Yes. That is my fear, sir." Cinnabar sighed. "We Kinner raise our children in a unique way. That is why you can always be confident in our people. As for others, there is always the chance that they may have different ideas."

This was a fairly serious problem, but not that much considering the unique advantages of the clan.

"The problem is not that big in our case." Ves smiled and patted the commander's shoulder. "Every Larkinson is connected to each other. As long as someone is up to no good, you will surely notice it. No one can hide their thoughts from the clan."

Commander Cinnabar and his men never experienced this effect in person, but they heard about it from other clansmen. It was actually quite effective in rooting out traitors!

Still, the Kinner did not think too highly of this method. Forced loyalty was one of the lowest forms of loyalty.

"While I admit your method is good at rooting out traitors, it's not so simple when there are competing interests at work. What if a situation similar to what tore the original Larkinson Family apart emerges? You have at least two factions going at each other because they both believed that their ideas will benefit the Larkinsons the most!"

Ves briefly frowned. In a sense, Commander Cinnabar was right. No matter how awful Venerable Ghanso behaved, Ves could not dismiss the fact that his fallen cousin always pursued what he thought was best for the Larkinson Family!

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, commander. For now, there is plenty of room for everyone."

While Ves was very interested in talking about the future of his clan, he really had to get back to work. He still had to upgrade the Quint and prepare Tusa's custom mech, among other tasks.

Ves eventually departed from the Ion Tracker and returned to the Scarlet Rose. The crew already brought a new Bright Warrior mech into the mech workshop.

Along with the mech, its future user was already waiting for Ves. Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson stopped staring at the impressive, gold-coated mech and turned around.

"Patriarch Ves. It's about time you've arrived."

"I'm sorry for being late." Ves apologized. "My other experiments took priority. I've taken care of them, so there won't be any more delays."

"Good. I'm really looking forward to the light mech you are about to prepare, though a part of me lacks confidence. Converting a medium mech to a light mech is not an easy task. I have never heard of anyone completing this transformation in just a week!"

Ves grinned. "I'm different. Besides, I'm not working on this project alone. Gloriana has already been pouring over this problem back in civilized space. She has constantly updated me with new design schematics and such. Together, we have prepared quite an extensive modification plan. Just sit back and let us work. In seven days or less, you will finally have a mech that can better keep up with your performance."

"It better be, because I have been waiting for years."

The product that Ves intended to make for Tusa would definitely dazzle the expert candidate. After years of neglecting the light mech pilot, Ves would finally produce something that would appease the impatient man. Hopefully Ves would no longer have to deal with Tusa's nagging after finishing this project!

Chapter 2376: Blueshift

Ves didn't have much experience with working with light mechs. He considered humanoid medium mechs to be his home ground.

Medium mechs were the most mainstream variety of mechs for good reason. They were mobile enough to avoid getting pinned down by artillery attacks and they were tough enough to provide their pilots with plenty of margin for error.

The load-bearing capacity of medium mechs was also far superior to that of light mechs. Due to their volume, mass and other design properties, medium mechs were able to carry enough weapons and other gear to make it easy for any of them to contribute in battle.

Light mechs traded all of that in to gain more mobility. They were faster, but they paid a lot to secure this advantage.

The relatively thin chest armor of a light mech meant that the mech pilot had to brave a lot of dangers with insufficient protection. This was the biggest reason why most mech pilots would rather not pilot these challenging mechs.

One single mistake could easily spell death!

The casualty rates of light mech pilots were statistically the highest in every star sector the MTA surveyed. Ves could pull up centuries worth of studies that pointed at the depressingly high number of deaths for this group of mech pilots.

To be fair, many of those mech pilots would have rather piloted a medium mech if they had the choice. Light mechs were smaller and therefore cheaper than medium mechs, so plenty of struggling mercenary outfits attempted to fill up the available space in their carriers by purchasing some 'affordable' light mechs.

These outfits got what they paid for. Their inability or unwillingness to invest in larger mechs meant that the mech pilots of the outfit had very little choice.

This was something that Ves personally disapproved of, but what could he do? Not every organization was as flush with money as the Larkinson Clan. Journeymen such as him may not be as good as Masters when it came to creating value, but even the worst Journeymen were still capable of funding a couple of mech companies!

Ves showed off the design of the custom light mech to Tusa. The modification plan and all of its diagrams momentarily overwhelmed the light mech specialist.

While he didn't understand any of the finer details of the design schematics, Tusa still knew enough about light mechs to judge the approximate performance of certain aspects by their appearances.

"This mech.. Doesn't look light enough." He said.

Ves grinned. "This mech is faster than you think. Look, it's true that designing a light mech from the ground up is much better than stripping down an existing medium mech.

However, we don't have the time to do the former, so I'm trying to implement the latter in the best way possible. In this case, despite our lack of time, we have an abundant amount of resources, much of which consists of rare and valuable exotics."

"You mean you..."

"Your guess is right. Any problem can be solved as long as I stuff enough high-quality components in your mech! To be honest, some of the components such as the flight system and the power reactor will be rebuilt to second-class standards. Do you know what that means? It's specs have surpassed the standard expected of a third-class mech or a bridge mech!

Though Ves still had to strip plenty of Breyer alloy and other mass, the stripped down Bright Warrior still retained much of its resilient structure! This meant that Tusa wouldn't have to cut it so close in battle. Compared to his current light mech, the defensive capability of his upcoming mech was at least an order of magnitude higher!

Giving his expert candidates more durable mechs was one of the main reasons why he went through the trouble of making them. Each and every expert candidate and expert pilot was valuable to Ves. How tragic would it be if any of them died before they managed to leave the Nyxian Gap?

Ves and the rest of the clan would definitely cry until they had no tears if someone like Joshua lost his life!

As for Tusa, Ves figured he wouldn't cry as much tears, but that didn't mean he was fine with this outcome. An expert candidate was an expert candidate, and Ves was not in the habit of squandering valuable assets.

"I don't need an excessive amount of defense." Tusa stated with a frown. "I appreciate your work in trying to increase the protective capabilities of my mech, but if I can sacrifice most of that to gain 10 percent higher acceleration, I can live with that!"

Ves doubted that. The pirate armada barreling down on their fleet possessed a lot of firepower. Even if Tusa piloted the most nimble light mech in the clan, the Gravada Knarlax merely had to instruct a hundred of its secondary gun batteries to saturate the surrounding space!

Therefore, Ves was pretty adamant in sticking to his current plan.

Tusa may make as many unreasonable demands he wanted, but according to his professional judgement, Ves had the obligation to protect his current client from his own stupid decisions.

Of course, he didn't put it that way to Tusa.

"The Bright Warrior mech is by nature a medium mech that heavily emphasises its armor. Converting it to a light mech can only go so far. The proper way to enhance its mobility from that point isn't to strip any further structure. I've already done that. It may not look this way, but the design that you're seeing right now is as barebones as I can make it. At this point, Gloriana and I looked at upgrading some of its core parts to speed it up. If you look at the spec sheet, you'll see that the end product is projected to be substantially faster than your current mech in almost every criteria."

This wasn't difficult to achieve as Tusa piloted a normal premium light mech up until now. The commercial mech that Tusa was accustomed to was a good, speedy machine, but its budget constraints meant that its materials and parts were highly constrained.

With light mechs, miniaturization was a very important concept. A part that accomplished the same job as another part but took half the amount of space was at least several times more expensive!

In fact, it was more common to see these smaller parts selling for eight, ten or even fifteen times the cost of something larger!

A commercial mech could never incorporate so much waste, but fortunately this was different. Ves had a sufficient amount of exotics at his disposal to cobble up some replacement parts that were lighter, took up much less space or delivered superior performance!

Though Ves was only able to apply this treatment to a couple of parts under the circumstances, this was already enough to turn Tusa's mech into an incredibly elusive mech!

Not even the light mechs of the Penitent Sisters could match the extravagant amount of expensive materials that Ves intended to use for this project!

After Ves parried every request to make the design faster, Tusa reluctantly accepted the current plan.

The work proceeded without issue. Ves may not have spent too much time on this project, but Gloriana made up for that. As long as Ves supplied a list of every exotic in his fleet's possession, she could licence any superior component that made use of these materials.

It actually took less than a week for Ves to put the custom mech together. Compared to a typical Bright Warrior, the mech reserved for Tusa looked like it had lost at least half of its mass. Its limbs were leaner and its torso looked like Ves had taken a knife and cut off a lot of the bulges.

Though it looked anything like a traditional light mech, to Ves the mech looked much more formidable. Due to all of the mass and volume retained in the modified mech, it possessed significantly higher arm strength and structural resilience.

In short, this light skirmisher was capable of hitting a lot harder than regular light skirmishers!

When Tusa inspected the finished mech up close, he placed his hand over the surface of his new machine.

"You should get rid of the gold coating." He spoke. "I don't want to pilot something that looks so ostentatious. If I am about to enter battle with this mech, I don't want to attract too much attention."

"Oh. I'll take care of that. What color scheme do you prefer?"

Tusa thought for a moment. "Go for sky blue. I like that color. It reminds me of the pristine blue skies of home."

To him, sky blue stood for freedom.

"Alright."

Ves finalized the mech by changing its coating. This didn't demand too much effort as Ves only had to instruct some bots and machines to perform this quick job.

As the mech changed color, Ves asked Tusa if he wanted to name the mech.

"I'll leave that up to you. I've never named my own mech before. I can't think of anything at the moment."

"Then let's call it the Blueshift." Ves casually chose. "There are two meanings behind this name. Your mech is blue, and if it moves fast enough, any enemies observing its approach will see it slightly bluer than usual."

In most battles, this effect was negligible. Ves still thought it was still a nice reference, though. Perhaps one day Tusa would be able to pilot a mech that was fast enough to make his enemies see blue before they perished!

After making sure that the mech's spiritual foundation was fully saturated, Ves ordered some men to ship it out of the Scarlet Rose. Ves gave a stern warning not to pilot his new mech until they confronted the pirate armada.

He had already passed on this instruction to every other expert candidate. It wouldn't do for them to advance prematurely.

Time quickly went by after this. Ves only had to modify two more mechs. He did his best to elevate the performance of the Shield of Samar and the Quint within his current time constraints.

"I don't have enough time!"

He received plenty of assistance from his Braves, and the Larkinson mech designers back in civilized space also pitched in by performing lots of tests and simulations.

Despite all of this help, Ves couldn't implement all of the improvements he wished into the mechs. Ves had to retain as much character as possible, so he couldn't afford to make any drastic alterations to the Quint and the Shield of Samar.

He still managed to make a lot of improvements. It was just that the difference was not as drastic for some of the other mechs.

Ves was much more concerned about fabricating some of the weapons and shields of his custom mechs. So far, he hadn't begun to make them. If he didn't begin work on them soon, he had no choice but to issue his mechs with gear made out of Breyer alloy!

"Breyer alloy is pretty good, but it's no longer good enough." He muttered.

Only Unending alloy met his standards!

In order to break down the statue of the Unending One, Ves had no choice but to turn to his cat.

He moved to his stateroom and stepped up to Lucky.

"Meowww..?"

"It's time, Lucky."

"Meeoooww..."

Ves picked up his cat. "No excuses. I don't care if you are still sick. You need to get back to work and earn your keep."

"Meowww!..."

If your stomach is really troubling you, then I have the perfect means of solving this problem!"

Uh oh. Lucky knew exactly what Ves was talking about. He began to squirm!

"Give up. You don't get to go until you complete your job!"

"MEOW! MEOW! MEOW!"

Ves opened up a drawer and retrieved an egg-sized chunk of B-stone. He especially prepared this sample for just this situation.

"Stay still! Don't fight so much! You'll feel better in no time!"

"Meow! Meow! Meow!"

Chapter 2377: Ves the Veterinarian

"Meoooooww!...."

Lucky squirmed and meowed in panic as Ves dragged him over to the mech workshop. Ordinarily, performing an untested medical procedure should occur in the medical bay or at least Ranya's lab, but a gem cat was a mechanical creature rather than a bio-organism.

Also, the affliction that caused Lucky to continually suffer from indigestion definitely had something to do with the Unending One. When Lucky initially bit the statue, its entire structure was filled with dark energy.

What did that mean?

Ves should be the most suitable person in the fleet who could help Lucky get over his upset stomach!

He grinned and he placed his cat on a worktable. His pet clanked onto the solid surface as his metallic form. Lucky's weak limbs impotently flailed as he tried to escape the machinations of his owner.

"Meoow...."

"None of that, Lucky. I gave you several weeks to get back into one piece, but you have only managed to regenerate your physical wounds so far. It won't be long before we bump into the pirate armada and I don't want you to be left in this defenseless state at that time. This is for your own good!"

"Meooow!"

Lucky obviously didn't agree, but what he thought was inconsequential. Ves had waited long enough but it didn't look as if his gem cat's mineral processing system could handle something as strange as spiritually-charged Unending alloy.

As Ves studied his pet's appearance, he once again became fascinated by the cat's remarkable nature.

Who designed him? Was he unique, or were there other gem cats out there? Did all of them possess a spirit like Lucky?

He figured that his mother ought to know more. Ves did not miss the fact that Lucky behaved very familiar with her in the few times she showed up. Not even her ghost form fazed his cat!

"Well, I'll get those answers sooner or later." He muttered as he stroked his hand across Lucky's smooth surface. "Now, I just need to get you back to normal."

Ves did not bother to pull out any scanners to study Lucky's internals. He had tried many times, but this act never yielded any result.

"That's fine."

He possessed an alternate method of looking inside Lucky. Whatever prevented him from scanning Lucky's body past his exterior did not do much against his spiritual senses.

In fact, Ves wondered if he could use the same trick he used to defeat the anti-copy measure on the Darkbreak module on his pet.

"It should be viable."

Ves began to load the design for the spiritual construct necessary to accomplish this feat. He hadn't neglected this function during the past month. Whenever he had some idle time, he spent at least some of his attention on expanding his kit of temporary spiritual augments. There was no burden to his mind at all as long as he didn't activate any of them. Through this method, he stored dozens of different useful abilities in the storage space of his implant.

Once Ves molded some of his free spiritual energy into a fairly sophisticated spiritual camera construct, he began to activate it. He abruptly gained double vision, causing him to feel a bit dizzy until he closed his physical eyes.

"That's better."

Through his spiritual senses, he interpreted the visual feedback from his spiritual camera. It was much more refined than the cruder version he made at first. Its resolution was higher and it could even record footage rather than still images!

Anything captured by his camera would automatically be translated and dumped into his implant. This meant that he could keep his spiritual camera active without manually needing to translate his spiritual file format into an electronic file format.

In fact, if he was willing to, he could keep all of his recorded data in a spiritual form. This was useful in cases when his implant was restricted or compromised!

While Ves did not think of using his spiritual camera as a means to look beneath the surface of objects, there should barely be anything stopping it from being used that way.

Of course, anything covered by B-stone or a strong spiritual source such as expert pilots were different.

When Ves moved his camera forward until it entered Lucky's torso, his cat shivered all of a sudden.

"Meow..?"

His camera immediately returned completely dark images, so Ves had to tweak its settings to detect alternate input such as infrared radiation.

"That's better."

Ves gained a monochrome view of some of Lucky's insides. As expected, a gem cat's body was not some kind of black box. Instead, Ves encountered a dizzying collection of small but incredibly sophisticated-looking high tech parts.

He frowned. While it was nice to see what Lucky was made of, the problem was that Ves recognized none of the functions of the different components! They were so advanced that only someone extremely well versed in high technology such as Master Willix could make sense of his observations!

Though Ves continually stored everything he saw in his implant, there was little chance he could ever make use of them for a long time.

Perhaps only when Ves was capable of building a gem cat himself would all of this observational data be of use. Until then, it only took up space.

"Well, let's look at his stomach at least. I'm wondering what goes on inside."

As Lucky was a gem cat that converted both raw and refined exotics into gems, the stomach was a key organ or part to him. Ves had long wondered how Lucky's stomach actually broke down all of those varied exotics, many of which possessed dangerous and unusual properties.

Unfortunately, as soon as the spiritual camera entered the stomach, Ves saw nothing but blinding noise!

"Damnit! I feared this would happen!"

There was no way that Lucky could eat many kilograms of exotics and not explode. Aside from his mechanical nature, his cat was just as large as a regular house cat!

For this reason, his stomach part was very likely a dimensional pocket of some sorts. Anything that entered it appeared into a different space with a much larger volume.

All of this meant that Ves couldn't observe what went on inside. This was the true black box portion of his cat.

In the end, Ves didn't really gain much data that helped him devise an effective treatment.

Ves shrugged. "I'll have to resort to guesswork and speculation instead of hard data and solid theory."

Well, it wasn't as if he was a stranger to shooting from the hip. While judging whether an experiment would go well by listening to his intuition, his gut and his whims was not that reliable, it worked for the most part.

The most important support was to back up his guesses with at least some logic.

Ves retracted his spiritual camera and turned his attention to the egg-sized nugget of B-stone in his hand.

Unlike other spiritually-reactive materials, B-stone blocked and repelled spirituality. It was the only material that Ves encountered that possessed this useful property.

He eyed his cat, who was still panicked at the prospect of becoming Ves' next test subject. Lucky had witnessed Ves performing all sorts of depraved experiments when he was swept up in his passion, and right now the glint in the mech designer's eyes did not look reassuring!

"Meow.. meoww.."

"What are you talking about, Lucky? You don't need to call the MTA in order to report a crime against humanity. I'm trying to heal you, not hurt you. Besides, you're a cat, remember? Human rights don't apply to you, silly!"

"Meeooow!.."

"There's no need to approach any of those animal protection societies either. You're a mechanical cat to them, which means they believe you're just a machine that emulates life. It's not their fault they can't determine that you're the real deal."

"Meeeeeooww!!...." Lucky despairingly yowled.

"Look, I don't see why you are trying so hard to get away. My theory is sound! Right now, I believe that the incredibly hard nature of Unending alloy isn't the source of your problems. You managed to eat an entire CFA shuttle. Even if it was three centuries outdated, it was still packed with numerous high-grade exotics and first-class alloys. If you had no problem processing and assimilating all of that energetic stuff, then Unending alloy by itself shouldn't be a challenge!"

Ves had spent some time to scan the physical properties of the statue of the Unending One. While many details remained a mystery, he still learned enough to know that it didn't possess any remarkable properties other than its hardness and spiritual reactivity.

Another reason why Ves believed that the remnant of the Unending One was at fault was due to the traces of foreign energy he sensed from his cat. It was like a small and hidden parasite was trying to worm its way into Lucky.

Perhaps the reason why the Unending alloy that Lucky had eaten did not exit his dimension stomach was out of his own protection. If the semi-processed materials exited the stomach and entered the other parts of his body, the dark energy would be able to sweep and infect Lucky from the inside!

What Ves needed to do was to weaken, restrict, neutralize or annihilate this hostile energy.

"What better way to do that than to resort to B-stone?"

To be honest, Ves wasn't sure it would work the way he hoped. B-stone restrained spiritual energy but did not destroy it. Otherwise, wouldn't Ves be killing his Spirituality if he put his B-stone lockbox over his head?

"That reminds me, I've got enough B-stone to build a proper helmet and suit of armor. I should definitely cross this item off my list."

He wanted to craft an excellent suit of armor for himself and Ketis. He wanted to make use of both B-stone and Unending alloy for this purpose.

As long as he built it to his expectations, he would no longer have to look for replacements for a very long time. With the modular design he envisioned, he could easily replace outdated components and subcomponents with updated versions without needing to disassemble his entire armor!

"Such a fantastic suit will last me for a very long time in the Red Ocean!"

It would have been better if he could add some self-regenerating materials such as Rorach's Bone. While it was possible for him to purchase the lower grades of this material from the open market, it wasn't good enough. He needed the high-grade samples, but those only showed up in auctions if their owners were stupid.

Well, he would get better materials sooner or later, so there was no reason to delay the formation of his suit of armor any further.

"The time where I keep buying or making a new suit of armor only for it to fall behind my growth is over."

As a mech designer, Ves did not specialize in the design and construction of personal armor. However, he believed he could still apply some of the techniques that made his mechs great on this project.

If the Allidus Alliance fleet had brought any Grey Watchers or other powerful cultists along, Ves would be able to give them a nasty surprise with his new gear!

His great desire shoved all of his doubts and concerns aside. Now that Task Force Predator was projected to bump into the pirate armada within the next two weeks, time was running out. He needed to finalize every project related to the upcoming battle as soon as possible.

"Sorry Lucky, but this is going to be a bit uncomfortable for you. Just bear with it, okay?"

Ves decided not to feed the entire B-stone egg at once. He grabbed a small cutting tool and shaved a small sliver the size of a fingernail from the whole.

"Open up!"

"Meooow meow meow!!..."

Regardless how much Lucky protested, Ves turned a deaf ear as he held Lucky's head and rammed the sample straight into Lucky's bottomless gullet!

After making sure that the Lucky didn't cough the B-stone sample out, Ves released the cat and began to look and wait. He had already activated numerous scanners that were programmed to watch out for any changes or fluctuations.

"Hehe.. I'm so excited."

Chapter 2378: Foulness

"Meooowwww...."

Lucky's face looked queasy ever since Ves forcefully fed a tiny sample of B-stone to him. The cat behaved as if he had lost energy and laid completely limp on the work table.

Ves wasn't sure whether Lucky was putting on an act or not. He knew very well that his cat did not agree to be experimented upon, but Ves was used to dealing with uncooperative test subjects.

"C'mon, Lucky. Do something. Has there been any change?"

"Meooow..."

"Maybe the dose isn't high enough. At least I found out that a small amount of B-stone isn't lethal to you. Well, for now. Who knows what might happen in a few hours. Your stomach might suddenly rupture and dump all of the contents in your dimensional pocket into your current body. Since the volume of stuff inside this pocket definitely exceeds your stomach cavity by at least a factor of a hundred, that means there is too much stuff and too little space. Do you know what that means? Your precious little body will assuredly explode into a rain of metallic parts!"

Lucky's weak head looked at Ves with horror!

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "I could be wrong, though. B-stone shouldn't cause your stomach to fail because it's not very energetic or reactive to physical materials. Instead, it is likely capable of inducing all manner of spiritual reactions, some of which may be benign and others that may be harmful in nature. The B-stone may very well gnaw at your spirit, acting like poison thrown into a lake. It would be quiet. One moment, you're alive and spirited. The next moment, everything in your mind is snuffed out as you have become no different from other soulless mechanical pets."

"Meooow..."

"Don't be such a worrywart, Lucky. I'm here, remember? If anything happens to you, I'll do my best to intervene. I may not be able to do much about your hyper advanced body, but when it comes to your spirit I can still do plenty. After all, I have built up a considerable amount of experience in experimenting—, ahem, treating people's spirits. As far as I'm concerned, I am on my way to become a spiritual surgeon, so you are doubtlessly in good hands."

Lucky didn't even deign to reply to that remark. He merely looked increasingly troubled as he feared his stomach might explode at any time!

Several minutes passed as Ves continued observing. Nothing meaningful changed aside from making Lucky more uncomfortable.

While it was best to keep observing for a couple of hours, Ves was way too impatient to bother with that. He was much more inclined to believe in his initial guess, which was that he fed way too little B-stone to Lucky to make any difference.

"Well, I think you need some more."

Ves prepared a thumb-sized sample of B-stone this time and proceeded to force Lucky to swallow it. This time, his cat had grown weaker, so Ves hardly encountered any resistance.

"Meooooowwww..." Lucky meowed as if he was about to lose his soul.

"Hmm, I hope there is a bigger effect this time."

The effect was greater than before. Ves sensed various strange activity boiling inside Lucky. At the very least, a larger amount of stray dark energy was leaking from his stomach area.

"I think it's working! Isn't that great news?"

The activity didn't last long. After a couple of minutes, Lucky's insides subsided. In the meantime, a small amount of foreign energy spread throughout Lucky's body.

"Oh, that won't do."

Ves had no idea if the Unending One was still able to control this trace of energy, but Ves did not wish to push his luck. He concentrated and tried to remove the dark energy before it could contaminate Lucky's spirit or something.

Once he shoveled the dark energy away, it automatically dissipated into the imaginary realm. Through this method, Lucky's body became clean again.

"Well, this treatment is definitely effective if it is able to purge the dark energy from your stomach. I'm afraid the dose still isn't enough."

This time Ves did not bother to hold back anymore. He cut the remainder of the egg into smaller bite-sized portions and stuffed them into Lucky one by one. Once he did that, Ves took a step back and studied his cat's current state.

Lucky looked like he had died. He lay flat on the table with his electronic eyes glazing over. Even his tail had stopped moving!

What was even more concerning was the fact that Lucky's spirit was convulsing quite a bit! All of the B-stone he ingested probably had an adverse effect, but Ves was not yet concerned.

He did not recklessly feed B-stone to Lucky without any thought. In fact, he was confident that Lucky would thank him afterwards.

This was because Lucky was one of the few entities capable of assimilating all manner of exotics and extraordinary materials without rejection. This was quite a remarkable ability and one that was key to this experiment!

Ves basically bet that despite Lucky's spiritual nature, he was capable of assimilating or at least processing the B-stone without getting poisoned to death. His voracious gem cat had eaten all manner of dangerous and even radioactive materials, so why should B-stone be any more dangerous?

As Lucky's stomach attempted to cope with a relatively significant influx of B-stone, his stomach abruptly began to leak more dark energy. The quantity being expelled constantly grew until the entire mech workshop threatened to descend into darkness!

"Damn, why is there so much?!"

Ves hastily broke up and threw the dangerous energy into the imaginary realm. He had to exert more and more of his strength to do so because the energy was alive. The higher its concentration, the harder it was for Ves to manipulate it. He had to work faster and faster in order to prevent the dark energy from pooling too much.

In the worst case scenarios, the dark energy might become potent enough to summon an artificial anomaly or give the Unending One an opening to launch a remote attack!

"Begone, darkness!"

Lucky still laid flat on the table as his stomach finally seemed to expel all of the foulness that had occupied it for almost a month.

Despite the purification, Ves was fighting poison with poison, so from a physical perspective Lucky was actually doing worse!

"Just bear with it! You're doing great! Hopefully, your stomach gets back into gear and begins to assimilate what you've previously ingested."

Lucky kept leaking dark energy like a deflated balloon. Though Ves wasn't sure he had given him a sufficient dose, with the amount of foulness leaking out, there shouldn't be much left inside.

Once the flow had entirely cut off, Ves tentatively judged that there shouldn't be any need to feed his pet with another chunk of B-stone. Even if there was something less, his cat should be able to cope with the remainder.

Lucky a little bit more relieved at the end. He seemed to have gained a bit of energy, but not too much.

"This is a good sign." Ves self-assuredly nodded his head. "I think you'll do fine!"

"Meooowww..."

"I think this is enough for one day. You better heal up quickly. If there is no progress in a day, then I'll come back with another B-stone."

"Meow!"

Lucky looked incredibly distressed after he heard this statement!

"If you don't want to become my patient anymore, then don't be sick anymore. You'll get better. I know you will."

Ves had great confidence in Lucky's digestive capabilities. Now that the B-stone he ingested got rid of the indigestible dark energy, his stomach should be back to normal now. This meant that Lucky should be able to process both Unending alloy and B-stone regardless of their difficult and conflicting properties.

He picked up his limp cat and brought him out of the mech workshop. Once he returned to his stateroom, he dropped Lucky onto his couch like a sack of nutrient packs.

"Meooow... meooowwww...."

"That's good. If your tummy hurts, then it's obviously doing something. You'll be back to normal in no time. In fact, you'll definitely become even stronger! I can't imagine how powerful you will be after you have assimilated the properties of both B-stone and Unending alloy!

Though Lucky looked tortured, Ves did not worry too much about his cat anymore. In his limited judgement, his cat's life shouldn't be under threat. Even if some kind of accident happened, as long as Lucky remained alive in spirit, Ves was confident he could patch him up somehow.

Since Lucky apparently needed more time to settle his stomach, Ves began to call up his designs for the gear he intended to build with the Unending alloy that Lucky would hopefully be able to process with his teeth.

He frowned a bit at the rough designs. The various swords, spears and shields for the custom mechs reserved for the expert candidates of his clan did not look very refined.

A helpless expression appeared on his face. "I can't expect too much from a cat."

Using Lucky to process an extremely hard metallic substance was as crude and primitive as using his bare hands to assemble a data chip!

Ves had already studied the bite marks on the statue of the Unending One extensively. While it showed that Lucky should have little problem chewing through the hard material, his bites weren't exactly as straight and precise as a machine cutter.

This imposed a lot of limitations to Ves. He had to assume that any portions that Lucky would be able to chew off would be rough, irregular and jagged.

Perhaps he might be able to get Lucky to chew some of the roughest parts, but his carnivore-like teeth weren't suited for fine work. This meant that Ves would have to accept the fact that he would be working with lots of irregular chunks.

Considering these limitations, Ves had to make a lot of compromises in his designs to cope with this outcome.

For example, the tower shield reserved for the Aurora Titan would likely consist of the biggest slab possible. Ideally, Ves wanted Lucky to separate the middle of the statue of the tentacled whale so that Ves would be able to gain the most height and surface, but he couldn't guarantee it would come out that way.

"If a single slab isn't big enough, then I'll have to get more and fit them together like a puzzle."

Such a shield wouldn't be as structurally strong as a single solid slab of Unending alloy. Against heavy firepower, the shield was liable to break into pieces.

The same went for the other mech-sized gear that he reserved for the other mechs. Captain Orfan needed a solid spear and Joshua needed an even longer lance.

"Thankfully, the Blueshift doesn't demand that much."

It was possible for light skirmishers to arm themselves with bigger weapons, but they usually did not do so for various reasons. Creating a pair of daggers and perhaps some extras should be one of the easiest jobs.

Too small was not necessarily a good thing, however. In order to separate the plates required to build an Unending alloy combat suit, he needed Lucky to bite out very thin plates. This sounded like a difficult task and Ves would probably have to plan and supervise the process closely.

"Meow! Meow! Meow!"

Lucky started huffing and meowing, causing Ves to turn his attention away from his rough but ambitious designs.

"Is it time?!" Ves' eyes lit up. "Are you finally about to solve your constipation problems?"

"Meooooowww..."

"This is good! Keep pushing! You can do it, Lucky!"

It was very doubtful that his words actually helped, but Lucky was far too troubled to pay attention to Ves anymore.

His tail flopped frantically as his body began to feel more and more pressure from his stomach. Lucky looked at his lower body with concern. He had never regretted eating something so much!

Chapter 2379: Highly Unstable

Ves had moved closer to his cat. He watched with all smiles as Lucky panted and squirmed as if he was in great pain.

In the past, Ves suffered from stomach aches as well, mostly because he ate something that didn't agree with his digestive systems. With advanced pills and remedies, these problems usually went away quickly, but none of them worked for a mechanical lifeform such as Lucky.

His cat had no choice but to work out his problem the natural way.

"Meooww... meowww..."

Though Lucky didn't look as limp as before, he was far from going back to normal. The gem cat weakly jerked his limbs as if he wanted to get as far away from Ves as possible.

For his part, Ves kept smiling in expectation at his cat. After all this trouble, his cat would hopefully recover from his lengthy affliction.

"Come on. It's almost over."

After half an hour of increasingly tortured activity from his cat, Lucky finally seemed to have reached a limit!

"MEEEEOOOOOWWWW!"

Several objects suddenly ejected from his backside! They flew out with so much force that they collided against the bulkhead like miniature railgun projectiles!

"Yes! That's it! More!"

To his surprise, Lucky wasn't finished yet. His rear continued to eject a couple more gems at great speed until his cat's digestive track finally emptied.

"Meooooooooowwwwww....."

Lucky looked incredibly relieved. It was as if most of the pressure that built up in his stomach had disappeared. While his stomach still exhibited plenty of activity, much of whatever caused him to feel stuffed was gone.

Ves had long stopped paying attention to his pet. Instead, he immediately walked over to the side of his stateroom in order to pick up the freshly-produced gems.

With so many new gems, Ves looked forward to what Lucky had been holding this these past few weeks.

He picked up the new gems and quickly counted them. His eyes lit up as he realized that he was holding on to a whopping nine gems!

"Nine! Wow! I haven't seen that many gems in years!"

Seeing so many gems instantly brought up his suspicion that Lucky was secretly keeping most of what he ate to himself. Despite his designation as gem cat, Ves always suspected that his thieving cat was embezzling most of what he ate!

Certainly, this was not entirely bad. Whatever Lucky kept for himself would inevitably go on to strengthen his capabilities in some way.

At the start of his mech design career, Lucky wasn't nearly as formidable as now. Through continuous eating his cat had grown quite formidable! From antigravity to phasing powers, his cat had upgraded himself into one of the most deadly killer creatures that Ves knew of. Perhaps not even Centerpoint could build something better of the same size!

"Now let's see what goodies I've received."

He had to utilize his System vision to understand the products produced by Lucky, who was ostensibly a System product as well.

Five of the gems looked similar.

[Unstable Chaos Essence]

A terrible essence of chaos is locked within this gem. The essence is stolen from a great and ancient horror that would dearly wish to regain it. Carry this gem at your own risk.

"Wait a minute, this sounds familiar."

Ves expected to gain some gems that he could use to empower his mechs. For example, he wanted to gain something that could increase the damage of a rifle, boost

the resistance of armor or something else that he could use to elevate the performance of his custom mechs.

Instead, he got something different.

"This goddamn chaos essence! What use is it to me?! Nothing about this description states that it is useful in empowering mechs!"

Different from the orange gem that Lucky produced before, the collection of five new gems were all radiating a grey glow from within. This reminded him a bit of the dark energy that the B-stone had just ejected out of Lucky's stomach a short time ago. Could it be...

"Is there Unending One energy inside these gems?"

He felt nothing, but he chalked that up to the excellent isolating properties of the gems. Whatever the case, the seemingly useless gems ruined Ves' mood.

"When I told you back then to produce more gems like these so I can have a match, I didn't mean you should produce five more at the same time!"

"Meooww.."

"At least vary their colors a little! Why do they all look grey?"

With his hopes dashed, he set the Unstable Chaos Essence gems aside and inspected the second batch of gems.

[Highly Unstable Chaos Essence]

A terrible essence of chaos is locked within this gem. The essence is stolen from a great and ancient horror that would dearly wish to regain it. This gem is very frail. Carry this gem at your own risk.

"Ugh!"

The Nyxian Gap was definitely messing with Lucky's digestion! There was no other explanation for it. The highly unstable versions looked larger, but Ves didn't see anything about them that would suggest they were prone to blowing up. Regardless, the way these gems came into existence gave Ves enough concern to handle them carefully.

He returned to his desk and placed the gems onto the surface. He reached out in his uniform and brought out a purple gem that largely matched the first batch of gems that Lucky produced.

He still intended to use the purple Unstable Chaos Essence as a jewel for one of his wedding bands. Though Ves would have preferred it if Lucky produced something useful instead of lots of identical gems, at least he fulfilled this request.

Ves picked up a random Unstable Chaos Essence gem and pressed it close against his purple gem. They largely matched in appearance and dimensions, and that was enough.

"Together with Unending alloy and some other miscellaneous high-grade exotics, I should have enough materials to delight Gloriana when I catch her at our wedding."

As for the remaining gems... Ves did not feel very comfortable with them. It did not seem like a great idea to use something that sounded so dangerous on the custom mechs of his expert candidates.

Ves already upgraded and enhanced the Quint, the Shield of Samar, the Blueshift and the other mechs quite a bit. Once he equipped them with gear made out of Unending alloy, their comprehensive strength would reach a level where they could probably give their upcoming enemies a lot of headaches.

The question was whether this was enough.

Despite the many preparations that he and his fellow Larkinsons worked on, Ves didn't think it was enough. Reinforcing the ships, modifying the mechs, turning the Penitent Sister carriers into giant torpedoes and so on all should have increased the odds, but the opposition was so overwhelmingly strong that it was easy for him to feel that they were still too weak.

There was only so much a fleet of mechs and unarmed carriers could do against a swarm of pirate warships. The Gravada Knarlax inexorably closed in on Task Force Predator like an antimatter missile descending into the atmosphere of a populated planet.

The large caliber primary cannons of the Gravada Knarlax weren't very sophisticated. They were simply basic ballistic or kinetic cannons scaled to gigantic proportions. Whatever complexity that the pirates added were merely there to keep such a big and powerful weapon system under control.

"Yet these crude methods are enough to wipe out all of our ships!"

While Ves hadn't attended many meetings with Major Verle and the other military leaders, he knew how slim their chances were. The projections remained as pessimistic as ever. Though the exact strength of the pirate armada was still fuzzy, some of the intelligence that Calabast collected suggested that the Allidus Alliance fleet had hired some local pirate groups to bolster their numbers.

The infamy of the Allidus Alliance in the Nyxian Gap was high, and the heavy turrets bringing their huge guns to bear against the smaller pirate groups must have been an effective way to force the latter's surrender!

Once the Larkinson Clan received word of this development, Major Verle had to revise his projections downwards. The simulations all showed varying degrees of crushing defeats. Even the potential breakthrough of Joshua and the other expert candidates didn't help improve their odds that much.

It was already bad enough to confront a heavy cruiser escorted by a bunch of smaller warships. It was even worse if several thousand pirate mechs accompanied these vessels!

In fact, Ves even believed it was overkill to bring so many additional mechs along.

The Larkinson Clan may be strong, but it wasn't that strong!

"I've already taken plenty of risks, but it's not enough. I truly need to do more, and these gems might help!"

Despite suspecting that the new gems were filled with the Unending One's essence, Ves still felt he could make use of them. Compared to before he entered the Nyxian Gap, he had considerable progress in his design philosophy!

He expanded his spiritual toolbox with a lot of useful new tools and even found methods that could make mechs more alive and hasten the breakthroughs of expert candidates.

With all of this improvement, Ves refused to accept that he was incapable of harnessing the potential of these so-called Unstable Chaos Essence gems!

He already developed plans to embed these gems in the mechs or possibly the gear of his custom mechs. Of course, he recognized that planting them without any further steps was not a wise idea.

In the worst case, he might grant the Unending One a backdoor into the crucial mechs piloted by his expert candidates!

"I need to treat these gems in some way."

Ves turned his gaze at the larger but more dubious-looking gems. The 'Highly' Unstable Chaos Essence gems were presumably identical to their smaller cousins in most aspects.

"What exactly happens when they explode?"

He didn't know, and he felt very reluctant to use up one of the gems. He only had four of them in total.

"Maybe.. I can stick them into one of the Penitent Sister carriers?"

Each of the ships had been modified to a very extensive degree. Once the mechs inside deployed into battle, the combat carriers would no longer be receiving any of them. They were destined to boost ahead and try their best to collide with the Allidus warships.

If the initial momentous impact did not cripple the targeted warships, then the nuclear bombs and all of the other explosive goodies should do a considerable amount of damage if they exploded up close!

What if he added these 'Highly' Unstable Chaos Essence gems to the ships? Would the Unending One be able to stop the ships, or would his own energy amplify the explosions somehow?

Ves grinned. "It's worth a try."

He only had four of the gems to begin with. If it backfired on him in any way, then only a portion of the suicide ships would be compromised. The rest should be able to go on their merry way to ram the Gravada Knarlax.

It would be great if he could process the energy locked within the gems, but Ves wasn't sure whether he should tamper with them. What if they blew up in his face?

"Well, let's not push my luck." He softly muttered.

He put the gems away but continued to imagine all of their potential uses. While Ves was pissed that Lucky seemed incapable of producing any normal gems, at least he delivered something instead of nothing.

"Meowww...."

Lucky still hadn't recovered up to full yet, but at least he looked better than before. Perhaps when he finally processed the B-stone, he might get completely back to normal.

Ves picked up his cat and hugged his pet. "Good job, I suppose. Are you feeling well enough?"

"Meooww..."

"Hehe, you can't sue me. I told you already, you're not a human, so your feeble threats are pointless."

"Meow!"

Chapter 2380: Unending Gear

It took some time, but Lucky eventually regained a bit of vitality. Without his stomach going to war against the remnant energies of some dark and unfathomable entity, he no longer acted as if he was paralyzed.

That didn't mean he returned to normal. Sometimes, the medicine could be just as bad as the malady. While Ves didn't think this was the case with Lucky at the moment, the B-stone he ingested certainly did not make his cat feel good!

"Meoooww.." The gem cat pathetically meowed while he was stuck in Ves' grasp.

"None of that, Lucky. You're healthy enough to walk and bite, so that means you're healthy enough to work! No slacking off for you any longer. With the Gravada Knarlax and other pirate warships about to close in on us, we need to take advantage of every asset that we have, including Unending alloy!"

Ves held his cat like some kind of cutting tool and basically directed him to bite off certain sections of the giant statue of the Unending One.

He had already apportioned the cutting lines beforehand. He also prepared some external aids such as struts and guide supports to make sure that Lucky did not bite in the wrong direction. He wanted the cut-off portions of Unending alloy to be as even as possible.

With the help of his grumpy cat, Ves steadily split up the statue into different pieces of varying sizes.

To produce the pieces he intended to use for his personal gear, he cut the Unending One's tentacles into smaller squarish-plates or other hand-sized shapes.

To make the larger pieces such as a mech-sized spear or lance, he forced Lucky to bite through the entire length of the statue several times.

Though his cat openly took advantage of this situation by ingesting some of the Unending alloy he bit, he was too wary of this material to eat too much. Even if the dark energy that this statue used to hold had already evaporated, the incredible toughness of this metal still made it difficult to digest.

"Meow...."

"No breaks! Keep biting! Time is of the essence. The sooner you complete this job, the sooner you can go back to sleep! You're working overtime!"

"Meow!"

"What do you mean about bonus pay? Aren't you eating it right now? You've been stuffing your stomach until it is full. That's enough of a reward for you. After this, it's back to eating regular exotics for you. You won't enjoy this banquet for long!"

"Meow meow!"

Due to the sheer amount of alloy that needed to be bitten, it took two straight days to break off the necessary portions from the statue. The tower shield reserved for the Aurora Titan took an especially long time due to its enormous surface area.

Not only did Lucky have to bite through this shield and other mech-sized gear from the greater statue, Ves also forced his cat to go over every bitten surface in order to bite off the roughest and most uneven areas. He had to force Lucky to employ more precision and only bite on command.

At the end. Ves finally put Lucky down, much to the exhausted cat's relief!

"Meoooww!"

"Hey, I don't like it either, but do you see any first-class material processing machines around here? I can't help it that Unending alloy is way too hard for any of the machines in our possession to tackle."

Ves felt like a caveman for employing a solution as inane as turning his own pet into a cutting tool. Yet no matter how silly he looked, he did not regret it as taking advantage of Lucky was better than letting the statue remain intact.

Now that he had partially butchered up the statue, he ordered his men to move it out of the way. After clearing some room, he proceeded to refine and assemble the sections he had cut together with some other auxiliary components.

He first treated the daggers reserved for Tusa's Blueshift. While they were larger and weighed much more than his body, they were fairly small and slim compared to other mech weapons.

Due to their amazing properties, Ves made the daggers smaller and thinner than other daggers typically wielded by light skirmishers.

Despite slimming them down so much, their effectiveness in battle shouldn't be any worse. Unending alloy was very dense and heavy so even a slim dagger provided enough heft for the Blueshift to stab them with force. The relatively thin blades also increased their penetrative power, which gave Tusa the option to thrust the daggers through more protected armor sections.

Most of the finishing work that Ves performed merely entailed minor work such as wrapping up the hilt with a grip and other minor flourishes.

Like every other gear he prepared for his expert candidates, he added a bit of personalization to the daggers. With Lucky's help, he added his signature look on the crossguards. He also fashioned a unique pommel in the form of a claw where he set some artificial synthesized crystals.

There wasn't anything special about the crystals. Their durability was at least a thousand times worse than Unending alloy, but they were cheap to make and replace. Ves mainly opted for this choice because he was able to mold them in a way that allowed them to fit perfectly in place.

"If they break, I can always replace them." Ves shrugged.

Perhaps in the future he might obtain something better than a synthesized industrial-grade crystal.

In fact, Ves was more inclined to melt the daggers down and reforge the materials into something much more sleek and refined. Due to the crude way he made the pieces, the daggers did not look that good. Its uneven surface area covered with bite marks gave the weapons a distinct texture that looked rather savage, but Ves would rather produce something smoother.

"Well, at least these Unending daggers are deadlier than any other weapon."

He proceeded to assemble and finish the other Unending weapons as well.

The Banthar, which was the name that Commander Orfan came up with for her custom mech, gained a spear and small round shield. Ves also threw in a small Unending knife as a backup weapon.

For the Sword Hunter, Ves spent a lot of effort on adding his finishing touches on the large Unending greatsword. It featured a more prominent signature look of his and boasted a larger and tougher crystal as its pommel.

He also employed the same care for a shorter and much thinner sword. If the Sword Hunter ever lost its primary weapon, Commander Dise would still be able exert almost just as much cutting power with its smaller and lighter secondary weapon.

The Shield of Samar finally gained a shield worthy of its name and mech pilot. Though the tower shield's outer surface initially looked rough, Ves covered it up by applying a thin layer of Breyer alloy on the outside. He also added multiple sturdy grips so that Venerable Jannzi's mech was capable of holding and bracing the shield in multiple ways.

"This is an enormously heavy shield! If I hadn't upgraded the Shield of Samar's flight system, it would probably be left behind in battle!"

While Ves could have made the shield thinner, Venerable Jannzi had already made it clear that she wanted as much defense as possible.

He delivered what she wanted. The tower shield was so thick and dense that Ves was confident that the Shield of Samar would be able to withstand a direct hit from the Gravada Knarlax's primary cannons!

"Of course, blocking such a powerful attack doesn't mean the kinetic force goes away."

Just like one billiard ball hitting another billiard ball, any heavy attack that squarely hit the Shield of Samar would probably bounce the mech away!

This problem was especially bad in space combat. The lack of solid ground meant that mechs had to rely on their flight capabilities to stay in place.

"Well, at least the mech will still be in one piece. That is always better than sustaining damage."

Though he knew that Venerable Jannzi didn't particularly demand it, Ves still threw in an Unending knight sword for her mech as well.

After all of that work, he left the Quint's weapons for last. Since Joshua and Major Verle already decided to keep the enhanced and upgraded masterwork mech in its lancer mech configuration, Ves wanted to make sure to craft a lance worthy for one of his best works.

The Unending lance was long and narrow but not entirely smooth. It featured some cleverly-placed grooves and bumps along its length to offer a stable grip and ensure the lance wouldn't get flung away at the moment of impact.

To give the Quint some close dueling capabilities, Ves prepared an Unending short sword as well. Though the lancer mech configuration lacked the agility and flexibility of the swordsman mech configuration, a pilot as good as Joshua should easily be able to cope with these limitations.

"This is especially so if Joshua breaks through during the next battle." He grinned.

Though all of this mech gear took a lot of time to prepare due to their considerable mass, Ves had plenty of time left over to fill them up with some spiritual energy.

After all, Unending alloy was not only incredibly hard, but also capable of storing spiritual energy. Ves had a strong hunch that this second property might be very helpful in the coming battle.

He only asked the Golden Cat to fill each piece of gear with just a modest amount of her spiritual energy. The capacity of each Unending weapon was very considerable, but filling it up would likely weaken his design spirits considerably.

Perhaps it is better to leave a lot of room. If the expert candidates ever turned into expert pilots, maybe they could channel some of the excess energy they leak out into the Unending weapons.

This would not only empower the weapons in a way that completely fit the individual expert pilots, but also leave an imprint behind that could grow.

"Maybe they'll turn into legacy weapons someday."

Ves winced at the thought of the rough and crude gear turning into revered relics. He resolved to smooth the Unending weapons out as soon as he gained access to a production machine that was powerful enough to perform this task!

Once he completed his work on the mech gear, his clansmen took them away and moved them to their respective mechs.

With that out of the way, Ves could finally turn his attention to crafting some personal gear. This would be one of the final projects he embarked on before he met the pirates in combat.

Although Ves felt it was kind of silly to pay so much attention to infantry gear when he was about to confront actual warships, he wanted to make sure to account for as many possibilities as possible.

"The focus this time is on enhancing my spiritual combat abilities." He muttered.

Just like he did with Ketis' Rising Red Dragon suit, Ves envisioned creating a suit of armor that consisted of two primary layers.

The outer layer should be made of Unending alloy, while the inner layer consisted of B-stone alloy.

Ves gazed at the bin where he collected a large quantity of small Unending alloy plates. The bin rested next to a large bed frame he looted from Ulimo Citadel.

"There should be enough B-stone to create two inner layers with plenty of materials to spare." He estimated.

If there was any time left over, Ves also planned to remake Lucky's Misfortune Harness!

"Let's begin!"

He already prepared all of the designs beforehand. On top of that, he also fabricated much of the internal parts out of Breyer alloy and other accessible materials. His main job was to assemble them all together and make sure he ended up with one, solid suit of armor that could withstand any manner of material and spiritual attacks!