

Mech 2441

Chapter 2441: Living Fusion

Ves leaned back on his chair as he held the P-stone containing the spiritual fragment of the Blinding One in his hands.

Lucky lifted his head from the desk and observed the rock. A disgusted expression appeared on his face.

"Meow."

"Yeah, I can imagine that alien essence tastes awful. It's especially bad considering how luminars look closer to humans than exobeasts. I can never bring myself to eat sentient, bipedal beings."

His cat purposefully moved forward and leaned over the edge of the desk. He skilfully opened one of the drawers with his paws.

"Meow!"

"What are you talking about? I'm not a hypocrite!" Ves defended himself. He quickly leaned forward to slam the desk drawer shut. "And don't touch my precious nutrient packs!"

He ignored his cat and went back to studying the P-stone. Now that it housed the remnant of the Blinding One, it acquired a special character.

"It's like I'm holding a crystal instead of a rock."

The illusion was weak and easy to dispel, but Ves found it interesting nonetheless. The more he looked at it without fully concentrating his mind, the more he got the sense that it was a crystal that radiated light. Some of the rays were so blindingly powerful that he felt tempted to look away.

Only spiritual fragments derived from powerful entities could make him feel this way. Their quality was so high that their attributes somehow bled over to the material realm without doing anything.

"Now what am I going to do with you?" He idly wondered.

Considering that he was close to finishing the Crystal Lord Mark II Project, he thought about spicing it up by adding the Blinding One to the mix.

After all, the Crystal Lord was a design based around his initial exposure to the luminar race and its technology.

"I intended to reform its current design spirit anyway, so this is a good opportunity to do so. With such a powerful ingredient in my possession, it's a waste to leave it alone!"

Before he did so, he first wanted to see if he could derive other benefits from the fragment.

He was particularly interested in whatever knowledge it possessed about the history, technology and culture of the luminar race.

While Ves possessed a small amount of insight on this diminutive alien race's technology by making a deal with Master Willix, he only scratched the surface of what it was capable of. Just recalling the power of the ruins left by the crystal builders left him with a deep impression.

"It's not related to my design philosophy, but who cares. Everyone has hobbies."

He began to concentrate his mind further in order to delve into the spiritual fragment. He cautiously prodded the fragment and tried to elicit some sort of reaction.

Aside from a few instinctual responses, the fragment did nothing.

Ves grimaced. "It's not in a good state."

He touched it deeper and began to run his senses through the fragment. He hardly encountered any resistance because there wasn't much that could stop him. The only reason why he stopped delving deeper was because he could not cope with the density of high-quality energy.

After exploring the spiritual fragment from different angles, Ves became surer about his verdict.

"It's dead."

Of course, death was not entirely absolute when it came to spiritual entities. The more powerful beings tended to be quite tenacious.

Yet Ves did not feel as if the Blinding One possessed the same chance of coming back to life. The fragment's outer structure was heavily compromised as the Unending One managed to digest it for quite some time before his mother scooped it out and stopped most of the decay.

It was too late.

Ves did not feel any active consciousness from it. If he pulled the fragment out of the P-stone, it would have resumed decaying until there was nothing left.

"Damn."

Perhaps only the spiritual fragment of the Unending One might be alive. The rest had fallen victim to the tentacled whale's formidable digestion capabilities.

Without an active personality, Ves couldn't do much with the fragment. There was no way to bargain with something that was unresponsive to communication.

That invalidated some of his methods.

As Ves continued to wrangle with the remnant, he eventually gave up. There was no way for him to extract any information out of it. The spiritual makeup of the fragment was indecipherable to him and it was missing a lot of parts because it had ended up in the Unending One's stomach.

He crossed out more and more options until he was only left with a couple.

"Aside from some nebulous future applications, I'm better off using it as an ingredient."

He thought back on his mostly-complete Crystal Lord Mark II design. Gloriana and her erudites had made good work on it. He just needed to round out its spiritual design by addressing something he had neglected for a long time.

"The design spirit of the original Crystal Lord is too weak."

The crystal golem represented his foray into creating powerful design spirits. It was rough, incomplete and did not possess enough growth potential.

"What a flawed product." He muttered as he briefly came into touch with the weak spirit.

The ingredients were bad and his methods were too rough. He possessed very little insight on spiritual products back then. It was a true first-generation product that had failed to keep up with the times.

"That's okay. I can always remedy this shortcoming."

He had to make an important choice on how to proceed.

Ves mentally and spiritually weighed the crystal golem and the Blinding One and tried to decide which one he should preserve.

"I have three choices. First, I can feed the crystal golem to the Blinding One. Second, I can do the opposite. Third, I can break them both and mash them together in order to produce a brand-new design spirit that takes after the two."

None of the choices sounded appealing to him. He had to give up something no matter what he chose.

The first one was the most promising but also the most heartless option. From a utilitarian point of view, it made a lot of sense. He essentially sacrificed a defective but loyal design spirit in order to return the Blinding One back to life, if only partially.

While the Blinding One also happened to be a dangerous and evil entity, Ves believed he could derive a lot of benefits from the revived entity!

Aside from trying to barter with the Blinding One, he also saw a lot of promise in installing it as a better design spirit of the Crystal Lord designs.

As long as the Blinding One retained a portion of its powers and techniques, he could probably elevate the performance of the Crystal Lord designs in many interesting ways!

Though all of these potential benefits sounded worthwhile to Ves, he struggled to commit with it. Whenever he looked at the pitiful crystal golem, he could not bring himself to betray one of his earliest actual design spirits.

"That's not who I am, I think." He sighed. "It's not who I want to be. I need to stick to my principles for once."

He always tried to be generous to those who trusted or helped him. Screwing over the crystal golem was a deeply dishonorable act.

In comparison to the first option, he felt much less hesitance about the second option. He felt no guilt over purifying and breaking apart the fragment of the Blinding One before subsequently trying to merge the pieces with the crystal golem.

There were two problems with this course of action. Feeding the remnants of a powerful entity to a weaker entity was very inefficient. The crystal golem probably wouldn't be able to handle most of the power.

"There's going to be a lot of waste." Ves frowned.

The other problem was that Ves had never done anything like this before. He would have to develop a new method of integrating the dead pieces of one fragment with a living entity without putting the latter at risk.

This was why the third option was the most practical one. If he disregarded the identities of both fragments and just broke them apart, he could merge the shards back together to form a fresh new spiritual product without any of the baggage that plagued the two fragments. The new luminar-based design spirit would probably lack the ignorance of the crystal golem and the grudges of the Blinding One.

Yet this elegant solution also entailed screwing over the crystal golem.

Though Ves deeply wanted to step up to something better, he couldn't treat his own child like a worn pair of shoes.

Perhaps certain conceited men would not hesitate to upgrade from their current wives to better ones when they became more successful in life.

Ves could never accept such horrid behavior.

He felt no qualms about discarding regular products if they no longer fulfilled the job. He could not do so to his own design spirits. His design philosophy strongly opposed it, and that was enough for Ves to make up his mind.

"I guess I only had one option from the start." He sighed.

The temptation of reviving or making better use of the spiritual fragment of the Blinding One no longer twisted his thoughts.

The potential gains were considerable, but it was not worth the price of betraying one of the principles he really believed in. He deeply despised unwarranted treachery. Trust was something precious to him. How would he be able to maintain a friendly relationship with his other design spirits when they found out that Ves butchered one of their peers?

"Well, I shouldn't delay any further. The Crystal Lord Mark II has waited too long for this upgrade."

He felt much better now that he decided to keep the crystal golem alive. Without noticing it, he entered into a peculiar state of mind that was filled with optimism.

Of the plethora of spiritual techniques he developed, none of them revolved around upgrading an existing spiritual entity by sacrificing another one. The only times he merged different ingredients together was when he shattered them first.

Yet despite having to consider doing something new and unprecedented, Ves did not shy away from the challenge.

He had at least some reasons to feel optimistic. For example, the two ingredients both shared the same root.

"It's just that the Blinding One is much more complex than the crystal golem. I should take care of that."

Ves began to concentrate his mind to the point where he was able to form a strong and sharp spiritual blade.

He proceeded to separate all of the energy with undesirable attributes. He removed everything that felt evil or irrelevant from the main fragment.

Normally, he would throw away the trash, but this time he made sure to preserve it. No matter how much the attributes repelled him, energy was energy.

Since Ves had plenty of practice with this procedure, he skillfully purified the fragment of the Blinding One until it sparkled.

"That's better." He smiled as he evaluated his work.

Compared to before, the dead fragment lost a lot of energy. It no longer matched his impression of a dark god.

Aside from preserving its strong light and crystal attributes, he also retained most of its alien characteristics. This was a conscious choice on his part as the Crystal Lord designs were distinctly luminar in appearance and character.

"Now, I need to fuse this purified fragment into the crystal golem. Let's pull it up to the same level as my other design spirits!"

Acting on a hunch, Ves straightforwardly shattered the purified fragment of the Blinded One!

As Ves gained a lot of shards, Ves wrapped them up with some of his spiritual energy before pressing them onto the crystal golem!

"Come on! Fuse!"

What he was doing didn't make sense. It was like taking a steak and pressing it against his skin!

Chapter 2442: The Yearning of the Luminar Race

Initially, nothing happened aside from eliciting a weak rejection reaction from the crystal golem.

Ves was not discouraged. He kept pressing the shards of the Blinding One against the crystal golem as if he expected them to fuse.

Perhaps it was silly for him to think so. Forcing the crystal golem to absorb the shards of the Blinding one could be considered cannibalism.

He did not see it that way. As far as he was concerned, the crystal golem should feel grateful that he was willing to improve its strength!

"Come on. Eat already! It's your brother. Doesn't he taste yummy?"

Unfortunately, just because he wanted something to happen didn't mean he was able to get his way. The crystal golem kept repelling the shards to keep them out. Even if the design spirit stopped resisting, there was little reason for his body to absorb the shards.

"I may have overlooked an essential step."

He frowned and halted his current action. He tried to figure out a way to initiate a fusion process.

"I need to create an opening, but I can't allow the crystal golem to die. How can I do that?"

Clearly, pressing a steak against his skin didn't work. How was he supposed to absorb it, then?

"By eating it, of course!"

The problem was that the crystal golem did not possess any innate devouring capabilities. Its existence did not revolve around preying on other spiritual entities in order to fuel its growth.

"Maybe I can change that!"

If the crystal golem didn't take the initiative to open itself up, then Ves would just have to create the openings himself!

Ves split his concentration in order to form another spiritual blade. As soon as it finished forming, he drove the knife to the crystal golem and began to cut a small opening!

The crystal golem convulsed! Pain and confusion radiated from the design spirit as Ves made some additional cuts.

"I know it hurts, but I'm doing this for your own good! Just endure it. Once I'm finished, you'll feel much better in the end!"

Once he made enough cuts, he dissipated his blade and began to shove the shards into the open wounds.

The crystal golem convulsed even harder as Ves kept shoving foreign shards into the wounds before they had time to close!

It didn't take long for Ves to complete this step. Once he inserted all of the shards, he made sure to embed some of his spiritual energy into the shards in order to encourage them to fuse with the body of the crystal golem.

"Come on. Don't reject my gift! You've been with me for so long. Have I ever mistreated you? This is your golden opportunity to transform yourself and become a fully-fledged design spirit."

Ves continued to coax the crystal golem. While the spiritual entity instinctively wanted to push away the intrusions, some changes took place.

"Yes! That's the spirit! See? The shards aren't as foreign as you think!"

The crystal golem tentatively began to absorb the shards. Ves grinned as he confirmed the viability of this new method. While it was incredibly crude, he had no reason to complain as long as it worked!

Even so, Ves still remained on guard. The most dangerous aspect about this new and unknown fusion process was that the crystal golem wasn't able to stomach something as potent as the remains of the Blinding One.

He also feared that the differences between the two might elicit some sort of rejection reaction.

He just hoped that the two were similar enough to accept each other. He imparted ten percent of his spiritual energy reserves to facilitate the merger process.

The move worked.

As Ves carefully observed the gradual fusion process, he noted that his spiritual energy accelerated and eased the fusions.

Though the crystal golem exhibited more and more strain, Ves kept encouraging it with his words.

"Keep going. I know it hurts, but it will definitely pay off if you persist. Just think about it. Do you want to grow as powerful as the Blinding One? Then absorb his remains and turn his strength into your own! A bright future awaits!"

Numerous profound changes took place inside the crystal golem. The design spirit's entire spiritual composition experienced drastic shifts as the essence of the Blinding One sought to find a new home.

While Ves feared that the crystal golem wouldn't be able to persist, its determination was surprisingly strong.

The crystal golem yearned for strength. This was something that the design spirit inherited from the original luminar leader.

For a moment, Ves gained a vague connection to the crystal golem.

He could sense the inherent sense of inferiority of the luminar race.

When the luminar race was at its prime, the crystal builders experienced constant suppression from the other alien races.

The root of all of this bullying was their small physical size. Unlike most successful alien races in the galaxy, the luminars only grew to the size of a human finger. Though their civilization made incredible advances in the manipulation of light, energy, crystals and space, their tiny sizes earned them remarkably little respect when the dominant alien races literally towered over them!

Unless the luminars were willing to abandon their biological origins, their race would always experience suppression!

The luminar society became split.

As the race stubbornly sought to carve a place in the galaxy in the distant past, most luminars believed that they could eventually earn the respect of other aliens by advancing their technology.

In fact, the most ardent advocates of this approach believed they might even surpass and rule over the other alien races one day!

Ves felt very much in tune with this mindset. As a mech designer, he constantly worked to improve his mechs and make better ones every day. The charm of technology was that there was always a way to improve it. Progress never ended.

Yet not every luminar believed that relying on technology was sufficient.

A smaller faction of Luminars developed a different belief. Relying on crystals and crystal-based machines alone was not going to cut it. Many of the powerful alien races that dominated the galaxy did not solely rely on their intellect and mastery of technology to maintain their superiority.

They relied on the innate strengths of their physical bodies as well!

Having evolved from planets rich with powerful exotic deposits, these aliens grew larger and developed powerful abilities by leveraging the potent materials they absorbed.

To the radical faction of luminars, the only way forward was to imitate their betters!

What happened next was very vague to Ves. Evidently, a huge amount of time went by as the radical faction slowly diverged from the main luminar society.

The extremists engaged in radical research that increasingly disgusted the more mainstream part of their society.

Yet despite the many setbacks the researchers suffered, they gradually succeeded.

With each passing generation, the luminars became taller and bigger.

Their bodies diverged from the baseline luminar genetic pattern as the descendents of the radical faction gained more mass.

What happened next... was unknown to Ves. He received no more information from the crystal golem.

"Damn." Ves cursed as he pulled his mind out of the illusion generated by the transforming crystal golem. "I really want to know what happened next."

While the impromptu history lesson did not teach him much, he did learn something important.

The crystal golem was aligned with the main faction of the luminar race.

The Blinding One belonged to the radical faction!

"Just as I expected! It's no wonder this dark god was so big and tall. He really went all out to make himself as big as possible!"

Every luminar yearned to grow bigger. No matter if they pursued pure technology or self-evolution, they both believed that size mattered. The bigger, the better! No exceptions!

"What a dysfunctional race of aliens." Ves concluded as the fusion process neared completion. "I wonder if their desires eventually resulted in their extinction."

At this point in the merger process, the crystal golem experienced drastic changes!

It became bigger, stronger and more intelligent with each passing second. Ves sensed a lot of other profound changes that he didn't fully understand.

Yet no matter what was happening, Ves became increasingly more convinced that the transformation would succeed!

His intuition and his sensitivity towards life both pointed out that the transforming spiritual entity had succeeded in absorbing the shards. The crystal golem was truly inheriting some of the Blinding One's strengths!

Due to the incredible difference this made, the entire character and feel of the crystal golem changed enormously. Ves even felt that it was losing a part of its original identity.

Change was inevitable. After absorbing so many powerful shards, the crystal golem experienced a great transformation.

When the process finally ended, a small but powerful spiritual shockwave emanated from the evolved design spirit!

A blast of imperceptible light and energy washed over Ves!

With his spiritual strength, he easily blocked the energy wave. The radial blast spread and affected the rest of the Scarlet Rose, momentarily shocking everybody aboard the ship.

"Meow!"

Lucky jumped from the desk and stared vigilantly at Ves.

"Calm down! It's fine! The Blinding One isn't back!"

Someone else emerged instead. The transformed design spirit was undeniably the crystal golem, but he looked much different to his senses.

A plethora of light radiated from his larger form. The crystal golem had grown at least ten times larger. Part of it was because of the infusion of an abundant amount of energy, but Ves suspected there was more to it. Whatever the case, the improved design spirit was anything but weak!

"How are you? Are you still in control of yourself?"

The altered design spirit had become a lot more intelligent and responsive. The radiant entity nodded his head and communicated both gratitude and optimism.

"Good! I told you it would work! Let's celebrate your successful transformation by giving you a new name! I used to call you the crystal golem because you weren't very lively. That's not the case anymore. Now that you have inherited the power of the Blinding One, you have the potential to become just as powerful. From this day onwards, you shall be known as the Illustrious One!"

The moment Ves renamed the crystal golem, a shiver of excitement ran through the spiritual entity. The rainbow lights radiating off his form varied at a greater and greater frequency!

Ves relaxed his mind and let the Illustrious One celebrate his evolution by himself. The dazzling lights that his body released was disorienting.

Even though Ves paid the modest price of ten percent of his spiritual energy, he still had some reserves to spare, however meager they may be. This comparatively small loss did not impair him too much.

The price was worth it! Ves may not have created a new spiritual product as remarkable as the Superior Mother or Lufa, but it did not cost him too much to transform the crystal golem into the Illustrious One!

"I hope you succeed in realizing the ambitions of your predecessors one day." He sincerely wished.

Despite the fact that humans shouldn't sympathise with aliens, his close connection to the Illustrious One made it difficult for him to remain unmoved.

"This is why I love my work."

Compared to developing a crude but effective method of upgrading his existing design spirits, finalizing the Crystal Lord Mark II hardly took any effort.

Ves wasn't really sure what the Illustrious One was capable of, but the Crystal Lords would definitely gain a powerful blessing.

For this reason, Ves did not feel any need to add too many extra abilities to the Crystal Lord Mark II. He just added a single triggered ability called Final Light.

Unlike the other triggered abilities, Final Light only activated under very specific circumstances.

As its name suggested, it was a measure of final resort. Even Ves didn't know what would happen if the mech pilot triggered the conditions to activate this hidden ability!

Chapter 2443: Luminar Synergy

The creation of the Illustrious One did not go unnoticed.

Throughout the Komodo Star Sector, owners and users of the original Crystal Lord suddenly found their old mechs changing in unexpected ways.

While the Crystal Lords always possessed a glow, it had always been fairly weak. Only the mech pilots themselves experienced the differences.

All of that changed when the crystal golem morphed into the Illustrious One!

As his name suggested, the Illustrious One inherited much of the potential of the Blinding One. While that didn't immediately translate to increased ability, the integration

of the fused elements would only deepen over time. Ves looked forward to what abilities he might wield at that time.

For now, the Illustrious One just gained a massive boost of strength through unorthodox means. It was a given that his condition was not stable. The uncontrolled rainbow lights radiating off his sparkling form was a symptom of his lack of control!

The effect immediately altered the hundreds of thousands of Crystal Lord mechs the LMC sold of its customers over the years!

As Ves' second original mech design, the Crystal Lord was an aging lastgen mech model. It never reached the critical success of the Desolate Soldier and Doom Guard model, but it was already a profitable offering by itself. Its luminar crystal-based laser rifle was slightly ahead of its time during the rifleman mech model's release, but its performance could not keep up with the currentgen laser rifle models.

Nonetheless, its existing pilots had gotten used to the benefits of wielding a lighter, slimmer and less cumbersome weapon. As a premium mech, the Crystal Lord already performed well above typical rifleman mechs. It was no big deal for the mech to effectively keep up with its more modern counterparts.

"What is happening?" A grizzled mech sergeant wondered.

The mechs piloted by his mercenary buddies slowed down. Their unit was assigned to patrol a stretch of sandy plains on a planet that had been scoured during the Sand War.

Sensing an abnormality, the mercenary squad immediately entered into a higher state of alertness. Several light mechs roamed around in order to detect possible enemies while a knight mech protectively hovered next to the frozen Crystal Lord.

Suddenly, the mech seemed to bloom. The sergeant and his comrades immediately became affected by a glow that was suffused with an outpouring of light and ambition!

Every other Crystal Lord exhibited the same reaction! The mechs in the hands of mercenaries, security companies, secret organizations, pirates and even the Larkinsons themselves all seemed to undergo a universal evolution that made them greater than before!

Unfortunately, it didn't last. Several minutes after their owners and pilots greeted this unexpected surprise, the mechs quickly lost their new glows. The vibe of the mechs became muted to the point that it closely resembled its original level.

"What?! Is that it? Where is the glow?!"

"No! Come back!"

"What is the LMC doing? This is the second mech model that has gone out of control!"

When the Illustrious One completed its evolution, Ves stepped in to prevent the changes from affecting the Crystal Lord. Since this was the first time he tried to restore a mech's glow to its old level, Ves needed some time to fiddle out the right solution.

Many people noticed the dramatic changes before they died down!

The LMC became flooded with inquiries once again. Though the media had picked up on the story, the outrage was much less this time. The Crystal Lord wasn't as popular as the Doom Guard and the changes didn't negatively affect any customers aside from a few rare exceptions.

In fact, the owners of the Crystal Lord Mark I's demanded a return of the abortive 'free upgrade'!

Ves briefly discussed the matter with Gloriana, Raymond, Gavin and a couple of other executives in a series of conference calls.

After considering every angle, they eventually came to a consensus.

"The market needs sufficient reasons to purchase our upcoming Crystal Lord Mark II." Ves issued his final thoughts on the matter. "While we can offer either a free or paid upgrade to the customers who bought the Crystal Lord Mark I, this kind of change falls well outside of the scope of the original products. When we initially sold it, we never promised or generated the expectation that the LMC would implement incremental updates in the following years."

The projection of Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson nodded in agreement. "The LMC's business model is centered around developing new product lines and keeping them fresh by releasing updated models with significant improvements. We will only muddy this arrangement if we narrow the gap between new and old by improving the latter."

It was a pure business decision to withhold the 'upgrade' that Ves developed from the Crystal Lord Mark I. As much as Ves wanted to side with his customers and give them a reason to cherish their old mechs even more, the profiteering side of him won out this time.

The LMC may be relatively flush with cash these days, but the Larkinson Clan needed much more capital to acquire more capital ships and fund the development of its upcoming expert mechs.

To that end, Ves needed to build up as much momentum as possible for his commercial mechs.

With the incorporation of improved luminar crystals and the addition of a vastly-improved design spirit, Ves believed that the Crystal Lord Mark II had the potential to achieve the same critical acclaim as his other bestsellers!

On land, the Crystal Lord Mark II performed quite well. Its moderate armor coverage, its nimble movements and its light but very potent laser rifle promised stellar performance when paired with skilled mech pilots.

The design teams assigned to the project that led to its development had done an excellent job. Even without the constant supervision of Ves and Gloriana, the assistant mech designers such as Rina Orion did not disappoint.

Soon after Ves created the Illustrious One, the Crystal Lord Mark II Project entered its final track. New prototypes were being built to test the last round of adjustments and fixes.

The tests also served as an opportunity for the LMC to observe the effects of the Crystal Lord Mark II's improved design spirit.

Compared to the likes of the Solemn Guard or the Superior Mother, the Illustrious One did not induce a strong psychological effect on others.

It did not affect reality as blatantly as the likes of Lufa either.

Instead, the test pilots and observers noted that the glows projected by the prototype exerted a hybrid influence.

The mech pilot and any friendlies within the area of effect gained a higher affinity towards energy, directed energy weapons and crystals. While they didn't gain any concrete knowledge, their intuition and feel towards these subjects had noticeably improved. The mech pilots knew their limits and also exhibited better judgement whenever they piloted the prototype in simulated battles.

Overall, their ability to make split-second decisions in battle had improved!

Yet this wasn't all. When the glow was active, the performance of the luminar crystals inexplicably increased by five to ten percent. This was significant enough to warrant a considerable investigation.

Even Gloriana visited the testing grounds in person in order to study the effect!

No one came up with any answers aside from confirming that the strange luminar crystals were indeed sensitive towards the Crystal Lord Mark II's glow.

When Gloriana acted on a hunch and replaced the luminar crystals of a prototype with normal substitutes, the glow of the mech seemed to grow substantially dimmer.

"It turns out they compliment each other!"

No one anticipated that such a relationship existed. Not even Ves suspected that luminar crystals were so responsive to the spiritual signature of a strong luminar specimen!

"Maybe we've been misusing luminar technology all this time!" Ves guessed.

In fact, Ves believed that not even the MTA research team that delved into luminar technology anticipated this outcome!

A headache immediately formed in his mind. "Ugh. As if I don't already have enough on my plate."

Despite these oddities, the Crystal Lord Mark II prototypes performed well enough to make additional testing superfluous. Ves and Gloriana carefully studied the mech's improved performance parameters and tweaked the design of the laser rifleman mech to account for the changes.

After a final round of touch ups, the pair formally concluded the project.

In two different design labs, the Braves and Erudites both stood up and clapped their hands. The three design teams responsible for realizing Ves and Gloriana's vision basked in the honor of completing the LMC's first minor design project!

Ves proudly addressed the contributors of the finished project.

"Thank you for your efforts. Your assistance was crucial to the development of the Crystal Lord Mark II. We will mark your performance later and award you with additional Larkinson merits if your contribution is great enough. Remember, as long as you go above and beyond what is expected of you, we will always reward your efforts as long as they are helpful."

The members of the remaining design teams became more eager after hearing this announcement.

Earning more Larkinson merits was the best way to improve themselves!

As Ves studied the faces of his assistants, he noted that the Erudites exhibited a much stronger reaction than his Braves.

This was no surprise to him. Due to the fact that his Braves had all taken part in the Nyxian Gap Campaign, they were automatically entitled to receive a set of second-class augmentations.

Though Ves somewhat regretted this expensive promise, he was still determined to abide by it. No matter how much he had to delay his other procurements, he wanted to improve 'his' men so that they would quickly be able to expand their influence in the Larkinson Clan.

Obviously, the fact that the Erudites were left out did not make them happy. Intellectually, they understood that they weren't entitled to any 'hazard pay' as they did not take part in a life-threatening mission.

It did not prevent them from growing jealous.

Seeing the Braves earning some very desirable augmentations without doing anything special was infuriating! Aside from helping to implement some upgrades and modifications, the Braves had not done anything that strengthened the Larkinsons in battle.

Of course, the Erudites could never understand the fear and desperation of the Braves during the Battle of Ulmo Citadel and the Battle against the Abyss. It took nerves of steel to remain calm during the escalating clashes!

As far as Ves was concerned, the Braves deserved this special treatment. In any case, they were his boys and girls. He selected them for their courage. In terms of pure design ability, they were not as good as their Erudite counterparts.

It was for this reason that Gloriana insisted on leveraging bonuses to provide her assistants with an alternate means to earn rewards. After all, as better mech designers, the Erudites should be able to harvest a lot more bonuses.

The smartest and most capable Erudites should be able to climb up by themselves. Those who weren't good enough to earn any bonuses deserved no attention from Gloriana. She was quite fair and transparent about her intentions.

"Alright, folks, let's not get too excited." Ves spoke after the excitement died down. "We only finished a single project. There are five more that haven't reached the finish line. Let's work hard in order to finalize the remaining mech designs before my return!"

The LMC's Design Department became more productive as ever. The Miracle Couple devoted all of their available time on the ongoing projects, thereby speeding up progress considerably!

Ves also devoted a lot of time to fleshing out the spiritual characteristics of his various mechs. He implemented retraction dials to each of them and also added them to the LMC's existing mech catalog.

Pushing out this 'update' was very easy. Many customers had been asking for this function for a long time, so when the LMC officially released these minor updates, millions of existing LMC mechs soon gained the same ability!

Chapter 2444: Completing Projects

The Wodin Warriors detachment under the command of Colonel Alexandria Wodin continued to escort the remnants of Task Force Predator.

As the combined fleet exited Maynard Fields and entered the much sparser Wreckage Paradise, no pirates dared linger in the vicinity.

The aggressive Wodin Warrior patrol mechs accurately sniped any pirate mech that attempted to scout the combined fleet.

With their superior sensor, targeting and weapon systems, the Hexer mechs severely outmatched any pirate mech by a huge margin!

Unless a major faction similar to the Allidus Alliance stepped forward, the paltry pirate groups based in Wreckage Paradise stood no chance of winning against the Wodin Warriors!

Even if they all pooled up their mechs and mustered up their prohibited superweapons, there was no doubt the audacious pirates would suffer crippling losses. While pirates weren't known for their intelligence, they were some of the shrewdest people in the galaxy when it came to judging the profitability of a potential raid.

The pirates would have to be idiots if they decided to attack the powerful Hexer fleet head-on! The significant commitment by the Wodin Dynasty succeeded in preventing a lot of unnecessary trouble.

No troublemakers rose up and attempted to bar their path. They did not even waste their time on setting up traps and mines that the powerful Hexer scanners could easily detect from a distance.

In fact, many of the local pirate gangs instead converged on the previous battle site.

While the survivors of Task Force Predator captured the most valuable pirate ships and swept up the most valuable salvage, plenty of untold valuables were still floating and spinning through the battlefield!

Scuffles and skirmishes had already erupted in the battlefield the Larkinsons had left behind. Unruly and greedy pirate gangs fought among themselves to claim the most valuable pieces of trash. Additional pirate groups were also heading over, ensuring that the area would doubtlessly be showered with more debris!

Throughout all of this chaos, any notion of 'punishing the Larkinson Clan' or 'defending the pride of the Nyxian Gap' had disappeared.

The tentative unity that held the pirates together had collapsed the moment one of the strongest pirate factions paid the price for taking the initiative!

With bloodthirsty rivals like the Krella Alliance invading the territories of the loser, it was only a matter of time before the Allidus Alliance collapsed!

Meanwhile, the mysterious Hallowed Abyss Temple fell silent. Its shrines closed their doors and its main temple rejected every visitor.

Seeing that the Nyxian pirates no longer possessed any appetite to fight the Larkinsons, Ves let go of his concerns and continued to devote himself to completing his design projects.

Over the course of a couple of weeks, several more design projects reached completion.

Ves focused on finalizing the Sanctuary design after he completed the Crystal Lord Mark II.

As an offensive space knight, the Sanctuary did not possess a lot of complexity. The biggest challenges the design teams faced was trying to hit the right sweet spots. This was a purely technical challenge that didn't require Ves' intervention.

He mostly spent his time on expanding and fine tuning the ruleset that governed the behavior of its glow. The Sanctuary possessed the ability to neutralize or suppress every glow other than its own. Such a mech had the potential to wreak a lot of havoc if it was left to achieve this effect indiscriminately.

Aside from perfecting the rules he formed beforehand, he also added some additional instructions for future-proofing reasons.

For example, the Sanctuaries shouldn't be allowed to suppress the glows of any expert LMC mechs. No matter whether they were piloted by Larkinsons or clients, the expert mechs designed by Ves should not be so easily suppressed.

"I don't even know if it makes a difference." Ves muttered. "Expert pilots mainly rely on resonance. The influence of glows on their strong wills should be minimal to non-existent."

He sneakily added another rule to the Sanctuary's glow. When piloted by a Larkinson mech pilot, the Sanctuary invalidated almost all of the rules and restrictions that Ves had set. This meant that the third-class mech could negate the glow of every mech by non-Larkinsons!

Theoretically, this meant that a single Sanctuary had the potential to neutralize the glow of a first-class multipurpose mech!

"This is silly. I haven't even designed such an extravagant mech yet." Ves shook his head. "Even if I did, the first-class mech possesses so much power that it can easily wipe out entire armies of Sanctuary mechs!"

Nonetheless, the principle remained. The Larkinsons weren't obligated to play by the same rules as everybody else. This was his prerogative as a mech designer and a Larkinson. His customers were welcome to lodge a complaint with the LMC, not that it would have made any difference.

"Don't like it? Then don't buy my products!"

He didn't want any business from anyone who thought about using his own products to fight the Larkinson Clan. He would gladly wipe out anyone who was stupid enough to do so. Let's see them issue any complaints after that!

The final prototype phase proceeded smoothly as expected. With Lufa presiding over the mech design, the Larkinsons even managed to test how its neutralizing glow performed against the glows of other mechs.

In general, the newer LMC mech models fared better than the older ones. The strength of the design spirit also played a significant role. The stronger the design spirit, the more effort the Sanctuary had to exert in order to negate its influence.

In practice, the Sanctuary was able to invalidate almost every glow. If one was not enough, then two might do the job.

This indirectly meant that anyone wishing to leverage the glows of LMC mechs would have to field more of them in order to ensure their effects remained active!

The side that wanted to make use of Sanctuaries would therefore have to bring even more copies in order to succeed.

No matter what, the LMC ultimately benefited by selling more mechs!

"Hahaha!" Ves laughed as he looked forward to seeing this chain of events play out. "Since my counter is more effective than others, I'll definitely be able to displace most of my competitors!"

He was slightly careful in his expectations. While he possessed a lot of confidence in his Sanctuary design, he knew that the Masters of the Friday Coalition still hadn't revealed their full ability.

Even so, despite all of the rules that restricted the Sanctuary's effectiveness, it was probably the most effective counter to glows in the private market. Every other counter developed by others so far were either costly or difficult to implement.

Compared to an unwieldy counter such as the Glow Crusher, the Sanctuary possessed an undeniable advantage.

It did not have to do anything to charge up its effects. Its glow was constantly active, and also took effect in a wide radius around the mech.

Such a convenient effect was by far the most convenient alternative out of all the counters currently in existence!

The Larkinsons attempted to keep the test results and the existence of the Sanctuary close to their test. Just as with the Crystal Lord Mark II, Ves and Gloriana did not believe the time was right to publish this extraordinary new mech design.

"We should wait until our rivals and competitors have wasted even more time on designing their counters." Gloriana vindictively suggested.

Ves agreed with her decision. "The demand for counters from the private sector isn't high enough yet. Our mechs are still making their way into the hands of customers throughout the neighboring star sectors. Once more people have suffered at the hands of our products, demand will definitely soar."

When someone's house was on fire, their demand for firefighting services multiplied by at least a million times.

To most people, their houses were just starting to smoke. It still took some time for a proper blaze to form. Publishing the other mech designs such as the Crystal Lord Mark II first would definitely fan the flames!

As the arsonists, Ves and Gloriana eagerly directed their attention to the remaining four mech design projects.

With the Crystal Lord Mark II and the Sanctuary out of the way, Ves concentrated on the next low-hanging fruit.

The Chiron long attracted his fascination. While its actual performance was far worse than any of his other mechs, its durability and longevity was exceptional in relation to its budget.

As a training mech designed to produce the next generations of Larkinson mech pilots, Ves went all out. His spiritual engineering had advanced considerably since he initially conceived of the mech design.

With several new innovations under his belt, he discovered that several problems that used to stump him in the past no longer hindered him as much. As long as he wanted to accomplish something, he more or less found a way to do so after a bit of thought.

While Gloriana quietly worked to refine its complex, self-adjusting limbs, Ves proceeded to mold the Chiron's spiritual foundation.

He added several new functions and enhanced its existing abilities that it derived from the Golden Cat.

Ves held the Larkinson Mandate in his hands as he openly altered the Chiron's spiritual design in front of the Golden Cat.

"Watch closely, Goldie. The future stars of the Larkinson Clan will definitely pass through this mech before they rise. I need your cooperation in order to maximize the Chiron's results."

Nyaaaa.

The Golden Cat still hadn't fully recovered from the time when Venerable Joshua summoned her energy projection to do battle against the dark gods.

Even with the power of Unity of Man and Machine at their side, the expert pilot and the ancestral spirit failed to overpower their opponents.

Together with all of the losses the task force suffered, Goldie still hadn't recovered her old cheer.

"Come on. Don't feel so glum. We survived, didn't we? The Larkinsons who sacrificed themselves for us wouldn't want us to feel depressed all the time. We should cherish our lives."

Nyaa. Nyaaa.

Though Ves failed to cheer her up, she at least became more invested in the Chiron. To her, the training mech would make the Larkinson Clan stronger in the long run. With superior mech pilots that possessed greater foundations than the older generations, Goldie wouldn't have to experience the sensation of losing contact with thousands of Larkinsons at once!

As Ves worked on the Chiron with occasional input from Goldie, the training mech finally distinguished itself from the pack.

The mech channeled its design spirit in a more targeted fashion. Ves theorized that his implementation produced several positive effects.

The mech constantly reinforced the loyalty of its pilots towards the Larkinson Clan. The Larkinson Network already did an adequate job of that, but Ves believed it was very important that the mech pilots of the clan remained committed!

The Chiron also fostered greater trust in the mech cadet's fellow classmates and other Larkinsons. Hopefully, this resulted in greater and more sophisticated teamwork among the mech pilots.

The Chiron also served as a channel for the Golden Cat to pass on some of the more difficult-to-learn insights and instincts. Goldie was connected to every mech pilot in the clan, so she should theoretically be able to propagate what made them strong to the mech cadets.

Ves was still a bit unsure whether this function actually worked. He had a good feeling he nailed it this time.

As long as this spiritual knowledge sharing function came into effect, the mech cadets might also be able to derive other benefits. Perhaps any aspiring mech pilot who struggled to learn how to pilot a new mech type might suddenly gain some help from the Chiron.

"Whatever the case, in time, every Larkinson mech pilot should be shaped by their experiences with the Chiron!"

This was very important to Ves. The Chiron served as an essential channel for him to mold the mindset and ability of the soldiers of his clan. The mech was an excellent way for him to instill honor, loyalty, kinship and other desirable traits!

Chapter 2445: Yandra Blocker

Ves felt better and better as he completed his stalled mech design projects. While the minor design projects didn't provide him with as much satisfaction as completing his prior projects, he still felt his design seed churning at the visible progress he made.

The Crystal Lord Mark II, the Sanctuary and the Chiron each contained several new innovative features that Ves had not implemented before!

This made his design seed very happy. His design philosophy advanced considerably faster after just a few months in the Nyxian Gap than several years in civilized space!

"Of course, I'm not stupid enough to stay." He muttered to himself.

He had gained a lot of progress but suffered progressively worse losses further into his journey.

The deaths of 60 percent of Task Force Predator's mech pilots dealt a heavy blow to him. Losing Nyxie, his Grand Dynamo and the high-grade serum all at once permanently hampered his ability to create spiritual products.

Nonetheless, Ves would gladly trade away these external enhancements to improve his core abilities. The knowledge he gained, the extraordinary events he witnessed and the battles he experienced all enriched him as a mech designer.

To him, it wasn't enough to design mechs from the comfort of a lab before proceeding to see them in action from a remote location.

He would rather experience his mechs up close! Not just him, but also his Braves gained a greater understanding of mechs. They learned what aspects mattered and what kinds of mistakes to avoid. They saw for themselves which theories held up in an actual battle and which myths turned out to be untrue.

Mech designers didn't learn these kinds of lessons as poignantly if they remained averse to battle. Ves ultimately believed that despite the inferior intellectual capabilities of his Braves, the mechs they designed on their own should definitely be more practical than the fancy products developed by the Eridutes!

"If the two of them work together and contribute their own strengths to the mech design, then that's even better!"

This relationship pretty much applied to the Miracle Couple as well. Ves never expected Gloriana to follow him on every adventure. In fact, he didn't want to subject her to any risk at all. She had no need to sharpen her superior technical design prowess by pursuing extremes.

Any shortcomings she might have for being a relatively sheltered mech designer shouldn't impact their collaborative mech designs as long as Ves compensated for this weakness. This was just one of the many benefits that their synergistic relationship produced.

The prospect of marrying Gloriana made Ves feel both excited and apprehensive.

"That reminds me, I should complete our wedding bands before I return."

He developed several new interesting ideas to make them special, but he wanted to wait for the right time before he made them. He wasn't entirely confident he could pull off what he wanted. He wanted to flex his spiritual abilities a little bit more before he tackled this small but crucially important project.

After all, if his mech design projects failed, he would only lose a lot of potential income.

If he botched the wedding bands, then Gloriana would definitely grow furious with him, and that was an outcome that Ves had to avoid at all costs!

"Well, I'm definitely on track to return in time for the wedding, so I don't have to worry about that anymore."

The pirates were nowhere to be seen as any scum that haunted the route taken by the Wodin Warriors had already gone on an extended vacation.

The Hexers weren't vegetables!

Bored with the lack of activity, Colonel Alexandria Wodin granted her mech pilots permission to form hunting packs that ranged further ahead from the fleet.

Typically gone for at least half a day, these roving Hexer mechs eagerly tracked down any presence of nearby pirates and ruthlessly blew up their mechs and ships regardless of their threat level!

Once this happened, a very broad corridor formed within Wreckage Paradise. No sane pirate gang wanted to be anywhere near this corridor until the Larkinsons and Wodin Warriors had finally left their space!

In the meantime, Ves took a brief break from his design marathon to perform some of his other responsibilities. He spent some time tutoring his two students before turning his attention to Ketis.

His first student had not been idle in the past few weeks. After significantly revising and refining some of her personal designs, she quietly completed her first original work.

Now, she drew on the stockpile of salvage and materials of the fleet to fabricate her work in person.

Since this was such a pivotal moment for her development, Ves had to be there.

As he entered the mech workshop of the Scarlet Rose, he remained quiet as he calmly studied the mech she was assembling.

He frowned a bit as he recognized what mech she chose to produce first. The large and thick mech lacked some of the nimbleness of more classical swordsman mechs.

Oriented towards defense, Ketis' first work stood out for its default armament. Two thick and broad swords that were not too long were already placed to the side. Their sharp edges gleamed in the light. While Ves did not have to employ much imagination to conclude the heavy swords were capable of slicing through a lot of armor, he was still skeptical whether the entire mech concept worked in practice.

Still, this was what she chose. Whether she was right or wrong, she would gain something from the experience regardless.

As soon as Ketis put the final piece of the puzzle together, she paused.

An unprecedented feeling swept over her. The satisfaction of completing her first actual mech was indescribable!

Ves understood what she was going through and did not disturb her. Several minutes went by as his student continued to embrace the distinct sense of euphoria that greeted any creator when they completed a significant work.

Now, several years after she initially came under his wing, Ketis finally joined the club of mech designers who succeeded in designing their first original mech design!

Once she came off her high, Ves slowly approached until he reached her side. "Do you know what it's like, now?"

"I do. I.. no wonder you insisted that I complete my mech designs. I'm grateful now that I've finally finished what I started. My Yandra Blocker design is so much more real now that I finished this beautiful mech."

"Is that what you've decided to call your first product?"

"Yandra is the name of one of our fallen Sisters." Ketis quietly responded. "She would have loved to pilot this mech. I designed it in her honor."

The mech held greater sentimental value to her than he thought. Ves did not comment on it. Just like her, he always put more effort into his work whenever it got personal to him. This was how passionate mech designers produced some of their greatest works.

"Well, now that you've finally made your first mech, why not take it out for a spin?"

"Uhm, sure. I already contacted someone from the Swordmaidens to pilot my first official work."

"Did you perform any prototype testing?"

"I skipped that step."

Ves frowned. "That's irresponsible, Ketis. I can see from here that there are several problematic elements about your mech designs that will likely hamper the performance of your mech. Many of these problems should have stood out to you as long as you bothered to test at least one prototype."

"I don't intend to do anything else with this design. I just wanted to complete it in order to make progress. I want to get as much practice as possible in order to design the Monster Slayer. That will be my actual contribution to the Swordmaidens."

As Ketis showed Ves an updated version of her plans for the Monster Slayer, her first mech was being moved to the hangar bay. The two of them moved to the bay as well.

"You still plan to design the Monster Slayer as a second-class mech? That's very ambitious, Ketis. I advise you to wait and get more practice."

"I know, Ves. I already intend to finish four more mech designs in the next two months. They're similar in quality to the Yandra Blocker because they represent my early work, but I'll definitely do better after that! I can hardly hold myself back from designing the Monster Slayer in earnest. I've made sure to keep up with my studies. I'm pretty confident that I have learned much of what is necessary to design a basic second-class swordsman mech. Just don't ask me about other mech types."

Ah, he overlooked that aspect of her. She didn't need to learn as much knowledge as Ves because of her narrow specialization.

"While I can accept you made a lot of progress on that front, your Yandra Blocker design is quite crude. It shows that you still have much to go before you are truly able to translate book learning into better designs. I recommend you design at least five more third-class mechs to achieve the necessary level of practice."

"Ves! That's too much! I can't wait that long!" She whined.

"You'll thank me for it later when you finally begin to design the Monster Slayer in earnest. I can tell it's your first passion project. There is so much at stake that it is truly worth the wait."

"The Swordmaidens can't wait that long! My sisters are long overdue replacements for their old mechs. The sooner they obtain their new mechs, the sooner they can catch up to the Penitent Sisters."

Ves turned to Ketis and looked at her in the eyes. "If you truly can't wait, then consider turning the Monster Slayer into a collaboration project. As long as you advance to Journeyman, you're qualified to work with Gloriana and I as equals. In fact, we'll even let you take the lead since the project is your brainchild after all. Does that sound better?"

She struggled with the decision.

Collaborating with the famed Miracle Couple ensured that the performance of the Monster Slayer would definitely be up to standard. This was very important because the Swordmaidens could use all of the help they could get from their machines.

The stronger the mechs, the stronger the Swordmaidens.

This reason alone pushed her close to accepting Ves' offer.

Yet another, more ambitious part of her wanted to design the Monster Slayer by herself. Neither Ves nor Gloriana had fought across the interior of Ulmo Citadel. The two Journeymen simply couldn't understand what she experienced when she dueled the mutated Grey Watcher in single combat.

As long as she remained in full control over the Monster Slayer design, she had room to realize her complete vision no matter whether there were better alternatives available!

One of the lessons that Ves had taught to her was that developing her own solution was sometimes more important than borrowing someone else's solution.

Even if the latter was superior in every way, Ketis wouldn't have gone through the arduous process of creating her own solutions. Without this essential experience, how could she ever tackle other problems over the course of her career?

"I... have to think about it, but I'm not inclined to accept it. I'm sorry, Ves, but the Monster Slayer should truly be designed by myself."

"It's okay." Ves nodded in understanding. "Just do what you think is best. Listen to your heart, not your mind. In any case, once you've successfully completed the design by yourself, there's nothing stopping you from coming to me afterwards in order to develop a more refined variant."

Ketis clearly did not intend to sell the Monster Slayer to the market. This meant she didn't have to abide by troublesome rules. If she wanted to tweak or update the design, she could do so whenever she wanted! No troublesome bureaucrats or administrators stood in her way. This was the benefit of keeping a mech design private.

As the two chatted a bit further, the test pilot finally arrived.

"Hey, sister!" Lieutenant Sendra waved as she marched over to the pair. "So you've finally done it, Ketis. You actually made this big mech. Well, let's see how far you've come."

Chapter 2446: Life Mates

As a mech designer, Ketis followed a very unusual development trajectory. Having been raised by a pirate mech designer, the moment Ves came into her life, she gained a tremendous amount of help.

Aside from stuffing her with Attribute Candies, Ves also filled up the gaps in her knowledge due to her lack of structural learning.

What caused him to feel a bit of regret was that no matter how much he instructed her, he could not adequately replace a proper educational institution.

This caused her upbringing as a mech designer to remain crooked. Her determination to concentrate solely on designing sword-wielding mechs was not just a personal choice, but also a necessity.

If she wanted to design something other than a swordsman mech, her shortcomings would soon become obvious.

Yet because she decisively specialized in a narrow field, those issues largely became irrelevant. Her strong dedication and passion towards her design philosophy gave her the potential to design unique swordsman mechs with traits that Ves could never possibly replicate.

The Yandra Blocker piloted by Lieutenant Sendra showcased a glimpse of the future. The large and slightly unwieldy mech performed like a hybrid between a swordsman mech and a knight mech.

When set against some practice targets, the Yandra Blocker's twin swords struck slow but hard. Their considerable mass also enabled the swords to be used as adequate shields, though their coverage was not ideal.

As a number of rifleman mechs carefully fired at the Yandra Blocker, its swords appeared to cope well against laser beams but poorly against kinetic rounds.

"One of the main flaws of this mech is that its main means of blocking damage also happens to be its only weapons." Ves noted as he studied the live footage and telemetry of the mech in action.

"It has a backup blade."

"The powerful arms necessary to wield these heavy swords aren't very fast or agile. Pairing this mech with a short sword or knife leads to a severe mismatch."

"It's better than nothing." Ketis pouted.

That was true. He should not expect too much from a third-class mech. The budget, tech and material constraints forced every mech designer to make some hard choices.

Once the test run came to an end, Lieutenant Sendra piloted the slightly beat-up Yandra Blocker back to the Scarlet Rose and emerged from the cockpit with a satisfied smile.

"Good first attempt!" She gave a thumbs up to Ketis.

"What do you think about my mech? Be honest."

"It could be better. I would say the mech is too rough for my liking. Compared to Mayra's work, your mech has a lot of minor elements that trouble me a bit. I'll tell you about them later. What I do like is that your mech comes closest to complimenting our swordsmanship style. I see the potential in your work. Keep them up, and soon you'll have every sister of ours begging to pilot your mechs!"

Ketis looked both happy and disappointed. Ves gently clapped her back.

"No one gets it completely right the first time. Just be happy that she thinks you're on the right track. That's more important than anything."

"I.. you're right. I should be happy that I've made it this far. If the Swordsmaidens like my work, then I'm definitely getting closer to achieving my goals!"

Overall, this was a happy moment for Ketis. Ves noted with satisfaction that Lieutenant Sendra spoke quite thoughtfully and took care not to damage the younger mech designer's confidence.

Now that Ketis completed her first original mech design without any serious complications, she finally gained the confidence that a mech designer ought to possess. Even if she botched her subsequent mech designs, her belief in her design ability should see her through.

Aside from spending time with Ketis, Ves also made sure to keep in touch with a number of other people.

One of the people he cared about the most was Venerable Joshua. Ves just heard that the young prodigy had just broken up with Venerable Jannzi.

Though Ves predicted that this would happen, the depression rolling off Joshua as he sat in his new cabin aboard another ship was palpable.

That changed as soon as Ves entered the compartment.

"Patriarch!" Joshua shockingly uttered and jumped to his feet. "Why are you here, sir?!"

Ves smiled. "I wanted to see how our expert pilots are doing. You look like you could use some company."

"I... I'm sorry. I'm not very presentable right now."

"That's okay. This is not a formal inspection or anything. Don't force yourself to be someone you're not. Just behave naturally. That's your prerogative as an expert pilot."

"Thank you, sir."

As the two tentatively chatted a little, Ves noticed that Venerable Joshua lacked the distinct sense of arrogance and alienation that he was used to seeing in other expert pilots.

Of the five expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan, Venerable Jannzi exhibited the most drastic shift in personality. Ves wasn't really sure why that was the cause. He remembered what she was like from the start. The current version of Jannzi was practically unrecognizable from the shy and deferential space knight specialist in the past.

In contrast, Venerable Joshua came across as friendly, casual and even intimate. He was an expressive young man, and Ves found it hard to dislike him. If not for his strong and vigorous force of will, the mech pilot would have been no different from a random person on the street.

It was as if Joshua still retained much of his humanity.

Perhaps his domain had something to do with it. Compared to the convictions of other expert pilots, Joshua dedicated himself to a much less common ideal.

He was the first expert pilot who developed a force of will that completely aligned with Ves' design philosophy.

What were the ramifications of this development? What kind of synergy could the two achieve? What miracles could they perform if they joined forces?

All of these questions and more deserved answering.

"Can you do something for me, Joshua? Please stay still while I try something out."

Ves ignored the expert pilot's confusion and concentrated his mind. He first began to 'emulate' an expert pilot's force of will by shaping his free-floating spiritual energy in a peculiar way.

With the new insights he gained from James, Ves observed how his attempt was too frail.

The root of it was because his willpower simply didn't measure up. He was only able to imitate the surface of a force of will because he relied on his abundance of spiritual energy to amplify what little willpower he truly possessed.

True expert pilots required much less leverage to empower their will. When Ves expanded his false force of will, it immediately made contact with the real deal.

"Wha!" Joshua widened his eyes as he felt something very familiar bumping into him. "Is that you, sir? Are you a mech pilot?!"

"No. I just know a few tricks. Now, please stay calm. Let's see what will happen if I do this..."

Ves pushed his false force of will into Joshua's domain. Though he felt a bit of hindrance, it did not take too much force to push through the bubble.

Surprisingly, both of them felt rather comfortable. The two's spiritual attributes and domains were very compatible and almost identical to each other.

They were not the same, though. Ves and Joshua were both different in many different ways, so it was impossible for them to develop the exact same priorities.

What Ves noted from Venerable Joshua was that the expert pilot attempted to mold his conviction as closely to the mechs he piloted as possible.

Due to differences in background, knowledge, mindset and etcetera, Joshua failed to accomplish a perfect match.

Ves did not really mind this outcome. A complete match may bring surprising benefits, but he was already happy with the extraordinarily high compatibility between Joshua and him. Their domains were similar enough that they might as well be life mates.

In fact, according to his own views on synergy, it was best if both sides brought something unique to the table.

If Ves had to describe the difference between their two domains, it was that he possessed a much deeper comprehension in how mechs were put together. His life attributes were geared towards facilitating the design and creation of mechs by infusing them with life.

What Venerable Joshua's willpower centered around was utilizing living mechs to the greatest possible degree. His force of will was especially attuned towards mechs that possessed life.

In fact, not any living mech would do. The expert pilot was so picky that he could only exert his full potential of his force of will when he piloted a mech that conformed to Ves' distinctive design style!

Could he pilot other mechs? Probably. It was just that Joshua would never want to go back to what he considered inferior goods. Only mechs designed by Ves and possibly the inheritors of his design philosophy would satisfy the discerning expert pilot.

This was a very onerous condition. It ensured that Joshua became dependent on the mechs that Ves designed for the rest of his career.

While he did not think it was wise, Ves appreciated Joshua even more because of it. This relationship ensured that Joshua would always remain loyal. The thought of betraying Ves would never come up, as doing so was anathema to his obsession!

This was the only unreasonable part about Joshua. After conducting a number of other spiritual experiments, Ves gained a preliminary understanding of the expert pilot's other possible traits.

Attributes related to cooperation and symbiosis not only enhanced Joshua's ability to meld with living mechs, but also made it remarkably easy for him to get along with other people.

The attributes related to growth meant that Joshua was able to improve any living mech just by piloting them on a regular basis. He was probably the most desirable mech pilot that any living mech could yearn for! Perhaps when he grew stronger, he might even be able to help a mech surpass its limits!

Aside from these amazing advantages, Joshua possessed some other helpful life attributes. For example, during his first breakthrough, Joshua was able to force a mech to repair some of its damage through resonance.

This regeneration attribute was extremely desirable!

There were plenty of exotics such as Rorach's Bone that could add self-repair capabilities to a mech. Venerable Foster's Belisarius came to mind. If Joshua piloted something similar, then the boost he could provide to those self-repair capabilities would ensure that his mech was able to endure a lot more punishment!

This was an essential advantage as far as Ves was concerned. Keeping Joshua alive was much easier if his mech made it through to the end of a battle.

Once he completed his examinations, Ves loosened his mind and withdrew his presence. "Alright, I think I have a good idea of what you are good at as an expert pilot. Let's proceed to the next item on my agenda. Tell me, what kind of expert mech would you like to pilot?"

"Are you about to design my expert mech?!" Joshua immediately became excited.

His force of will pulsed with anticipation!

Ves held up his hand. "Not so fast, Venerable Joshua! It will take a lot of time to design your expert mech from scratch. I'm just here to listen to your initial demands so that I can get a sense of what mech type and traits I should focus on. You possess a broad skillset that makes you suitable for many different mech types. A single expert mech can't possibly encompass everything, so you'll need to make some important choices."

The only exception to the rule was if he had the opportunity to design a first-class multipurpose mech. A qualified mech designer was able to stuff so many modules and functions in them that they could essentially have their cake and eat it too. Many first-class mech designers in fact did attempt to cover all of their bases. This spared them from the hard decisions that lesser mech designers had to make on a daily basis.

Perhaps one day, Ves might reach that level.

Chapter 2447: Expanding Pool

When Ves encouraged Venerable Joshua to think about what he wanted from his first expert mech, the cabin fell silent for a time.

Though expert pilots were usually decisive, a matter as important as this required very careful thought.

It didn't help that the young expert pilot possessed the unusual luxury of having too much choice. Due to his obsessive desire to pilot as many LMC mechs as possible, Joshua forced himself to become good at piloting many different mech types.

Whether it was ranged mechs or melee mechs, spaceborn mechs or landbound mechs, if Ves designed something, then Joshua was able to pilot them. Only a small number of exclusive mechs such as the Kinslayer and the Devil Tiger were missing in his collection.

Hopefully, Joshua wouldn't come up to him one day and request to pilot the Blessed Squire or the Valkyrie Redeemer!

The expert pilot finally made some decisions. "I think.. I'd like to pilot a mech that is equally capable at range and up close. I'm used to piloting medium mechs, and I hope the mech is useful in space and land battles."

His first demand was a bit problematic, but Ves didn't have much issue with the second demand.

"Second-class mechs can easily be designed to function well enough in multiple environments. In most cases, this means designing a mech that performs best in space and decently in the air. If the mech is forced to fight on solid ground, then it will probably lose a considerable advantage. This is the typical tradeoff of flexible mechs."

"Ah, will my expert mech be a third-class or second-class machine?"

"The latter." Ves quickly answered. "There's little point in pairing you up with a lesser expert mech. A regular squad of Penitent Sister mechs could probably beat you black and blue if that was the case. Our clan has already grown powerful enough that we are able to disregard most third-class threats. The enemies we truly have to worry about

possess second-class backgrounds. Your expert mech will have to be strong enough to fight off their champions."

"That makes sense. Aren't they expensive and difficult to build?"

"Let me worry about those matters. Don't hold back on your demands. If you want something, just ask for it. I'll tell you whether it is viable enough to add it to the list."

"I understand. Then.. if it's possible, can you design a hero mech for me? I have long admired your Transcendent Messenger. If you can design something better, then I would gladly pilot it for many years!"

Ves blinked. Though a hero mech truly sounded like a good match for a versatile mech pilot such as Joshua, it was also a controversial mech type to say the least.

However, hero mechs weren't as impractical in Joshua's case.

First, Joshua already developed many of the necessary skills to pilot such a difficult mech type.

Second, second-class mechs possessed a lot more capacity than lesser mechs.

Third, expert pilots picked up skills very quickly, so they never experienced any problems with piloting hero mechs.

His case was similar to that of Venerable Foster. Now that Ves thought about it, the parallels were a bit disturbing. He even thought about incorporating Rorach's Bone or something similar to Joshua's expert mech!

Ves hesitated a bit. "Hero mechs are strong because they are versatile. They are all-rounders that can fight adequately in most situations, but the downside is that they might not be able to match up against more specialized mechs. This rule applies to both standard mechs and expert mechs. In practical terms, this will put you at a constant disadvantage in duels against your peers."

"I can deal with that." Joshua confidently smiled. "I believe in your work. My expert mech will be better than the machines of my opponents. Besides, with the versatility of an expert mech, I don't have to play by their rules. I can rush in and attack up close if my enemy is a pure ranged specialist. If I'm squaring off against a melee champion, I'll just do my best to maintain my distance."

Since the young expert pilot had made up his mind, Ves accepted the decision.

"Okay, I'll note down this wish of yours. I have already designed a hero mech so I am pretty confident I can design a more advanced one. Now, do you have other demands?"

The expert pilot thought for a moment. "It has to deal a lot of damage. Expert mechs are difficult to damage. I need enough punch so that I don't end up like Tusa when he fought the big bird."

"Okay, so offensive power is your greatest priority."

"Oh, don't forget about defense! While I'm confident in my evasion abilities, I can fight a lot better if I can trade hits every now and then. I wouldn't have been able to last as long in the previous battle if you didn't reinforce the Quint."

"Okay..."

"Ah, just make sure it's not slow. As I've already mentioned, I'm pretty good at performing high-speed moves. As long as my mech is fast and agile enough, I'm confident I can outmaneuver most of my enemies!"

Ves grew a little irritated. "Joshua! You're not a child anymore! You should know better that every mech has tradeoffs. No mech has ever succeeded in earning full marks in offense, defense, mobility and utility. You need to set a list of priorities and make some sacrifices. Now, choose carefully. Which one do you care about the most?"

In the next few minutes, Joshua tried but failed to make a choice. He leaned towards emphasizing offensive capability, but did not want to sacrifice too much defense and mobility. In his opinion, his expert mech should not have any major shortcomings in any area.

"Can you just make an all-round expert mech for me?" He eventually proposed. "I've heard that it's not a good choice, but that applies to other people. With my piloting style, I can do a lot as long as my mech is versatile enough to depend upon. I'm not like Jannzi and Tusa who absolutely need the greatest defense or mobility. What I need are choices so that I can pick the right approach for any given situation."

While Ves understood his rationale, it was not that easy for a mech pilot to make the most out of such a muddled mech. The success of a balanced mech imposed a heavy burden on Joshua's judgement and piloting skill.

With specialized mechs, the mech pilot only had to focus on following a prescribed approach dictated by their mechs. This simplified their choices and forced them to excel in their chosen specialties.

In general, Ves preferred this approach. While making his mech pilots specialize in narrow roles did not make them useful in battles that restricted them, the key was that they never fought alone.

For example, Venerable Jannzi was as solid as a rock but could not chase after faster opponents. Venerable Tusa was as swift as a gale but as fragile as a nutrient pack.

If they fought by themselves, then an enemy could easily exploit their weaknesses. If they joined forces, then the equation suddenly changed! Both of them were able to cover up for their weaknesses, leaving only their lackluster offensive ability as a common weakness.

To be honest, Ves hoped that Joshua dedicated himself to piloting lancer mechs. The Larkinson Clan needed a champion that could pierce through the toughest armor and present the greatest threat to stronger opponents.

Of all of the mech types, lancer mechs were one of the few varieties that were able to leapfrog past its tier. The galactic net was filled with glorious tales of lesser lancer mechs demolishing complacent superior mechs.

"Lancer mechs are powerful, to be sure." Venerable Joshua remarked. "It's just that I don't want to be limited by this choice. If you can, try to include it in my hero mech, but don't weaken its ability to fight up close."

Ugh. Ves hated picky and indecisive clients the most. Despite their excellent compatibility, he could already foretell that designing Joshua's mech was going to be quite the ordeal.

"It will take time to translate your demands into an actual expert mech." He cautiously said. "In the process, we'll likely have to make a lot of compromises. Don't set your expectations too high."

"I trust you, sir. I have faith in your ability to design the right mech for me. I don't mind waiting a bit as long as I can get the mech of my dreams."

"That's good to hear. I think I have a decent idea of what you want. I will focus on coming up with a mech concept that is centered around a balanced hero mech. It's just... it still lacks something that ties it all together. It lacks a theme that shapes its identity."

This was not something that they could proceed on at the moment. Ves barely knew what he was capable of adding to an expert mech. He felt it was best to discuss the matter with Master Willix prior to deciding anything else. Mech designers needed to take a different approach when they tackled this special category of machines.

Once their fruitful discussion ended, Ves said goodbye and left Joshua's cabin.

Before he shuttled back to the Scarlet Rose, he briefly took a look at the Quint.

The mech had become a lot more impressive than before. Its battle scars made it look aged, but what really impressed Ves was how vigorous it had grown.

The Unity of Man and Machine that Venerable Joshua accomplished during his astonishing breakthrough had permanently marked the Quint!

Not only did it develop a considerably more distinct character, its spiritual foundation had grown considerably!

It was still a fully-saturated mech, but the pool had grown at least 50 percent bigger!

What this essentially meant was that the Quint became even more dangerous to regular mech pilots.

In his previous experiments, Ves determined that mech pilots with spiritual potential were reluctantly able to interface with a mech with 100 percent saturation.

The problem was that this only applied to regular mechs that were only recently enhanced. They all pretty much possessed identical pools.

Ves hadn't really accounted for the growth and expansion these mechs might go through. While not every mech would have the opportunity to achieve complete resonance, the Quint was a notable exception.

He was really scared of what might happen if he put any standard mech pilot in its cockpit!

"My masterwork mech has become too good to be piloted by ordinary people."

In his estimation, the only mech pilots who were able to withstand the greater pressure of a 150 percent load were expert candidates and higher!

"However.. a mech as potent as Quint should provide the mech pilots who can pass its test with enormous benefits!"

Ves even theorized that if he assigned the Quint to an expert candidate such as Imon Ingvar, a breakthrough might happen faster!

"This mech is still dangerous, though. I can't allow other people to take it out for a ride."

He activated his comm and drafted an emergency order that restricted its use. While no one in the clan would ever dare to play around with a mech assigned to an expert pilot, it was better to be safe and sorry.

Once Joshua finally received his expert mech, the Quint would become free again. Ves needed to think very carefully about who should pilot the mech next.

"Well, I have 9 expert candidates, so I have plenty of choice."

Although the Quint was derived from the Bright Warrior design, all of the modifications he made to the mech had already caused it to diverge from its origins. If Ves wanted to make use of the Quint as a legacy mech, then he needed to upgrade it into a true second-class mech design.

"The effort is worth it as long as my guesses are true." Ves grinned as he looked appreciatively at his handiwork. "As long as I keep taking care of it, the Quint will surely become a part of the Larkinson Clan's legacy!"

Chapter 2448: Step On Me

When Ves successively visited the other expert pilots, their demands all fell in line with his expectations.

He had already gotten a good sense on what they sought in a mech. Since each of them started off as third-class mech pilots, their tastes and desires strongly leaned towards specialization.

This meant that they didn't ask for too many incompatible options. They had little need for bells and whistles. They just wanted a mech that worked just like the machines they were used to, but with much better performance.

Each expert pilot had looked up on expert mechs and became dazzled by the countless examples of powerful works. This helped them gain a better sense of what was possible.

After collecting every expert pilot's opinion, Ves mulled over them once he returned to the Scarlet Rose.

"Venerable Tusa is the easiest to satisfy. His expert mech is smaller and his demands are simple."

An expert light mech was still very capable, but the size of its frame limited its capacity. It had less room for modules and other functions. While this limited the versatility and other parameters of a light mech, it at least reduced the scope required at development. This meant that designing Tusa's expert mech first delivered the fastest results.

This was a very important detail to Ves. He felt far too exposed even if the Larkinson Clan was about to gain a lot of new hardware in the coming months.

The sooner his expert pilots were able to exert their full strength, the safer they would all be. Hardly anyone had the guts to mess with a fleet protected by an expert pilot.

"There are other reasons for designing Tusa's mech before the others."

Ves was very well aware that Venerable Tusa felt he was being overlooked too often. If the aggrieved light mech specialist was the first one to receive an expert mech, then all of that resentment would probably fade away.

This should especially be the case if the mech was good!

The other reason to satisfy Tusa's demand first was due to the political influence he wielded.

Of the five expert pilots, Venerable Joshua and Venerable Dise were solidly behind his back. Venerable Orfan may be more reluctant but tentatively fell into his camp.

Opposite to them, Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Tusa were both opposed to the direction that Ves had taken the clan.

Of the two, Venerable Jannzi had become quite vocal about her opposition. While Venerable Tusa also disapproved of Ves, he was clearly more open to persuasion.

As long as Ves met Tusa's needs by providing him with an expert mech first, the latter's opposition would certainly fade!

"This is a good way to solve numerous problems at once." He muttered.

Of course, Ves still needed to discuss his plans with Master Willix. She might have a different opinion.

Ves yawned as he stepped into his stateroom with Nitaa following as his constant guard.

"Meow!"

"What? Are you serious?"

"Meow meow!" Lucky shoved a pair of gems on the desk before jumping away and phasing through the deck.

"You regained your powers!"

After several weeks of trying to digest the B-stone that Ves had used as a laxative for his cat, two odd gems came into existence.

Ves eagerly stepped forward and swiped up the gems.

The gems were dark and hardly any light passed through. Their surface was coarse as they were covered with rounded spikes that ran all over their surface.

His face turned odd. "How painful was it for Lucky to push out these spiky gems?"

He couldn't imagine the pain he would go through if he was the one who was forced to squeeze out these oddly-shaped gems!

"Well, at least I'm not a gem cat, haha!"

He proceeded to study them with his System vision in order to discover their details.

[Antithesis Essence]

???

[Antithesis Essence]

???

"...That's it?"

Ves patted his head and rubbed his eyes. When he inspected the gems yet again, they delivered the same description.

"You defective piece of crap! You're growing lazier and lazier!"

No matter how much he complained, his System vision never improved. For some reason, the latest two gems produced by Lucky possessed indeterminate properties. The only clues that Ves received were in their names.

He frowned in puzzlement. "What is essence? What does it mean when they are associated with the word antithesis?"

When Ves retrieved the definition of antithesis from the dictionary in his implant, he gained a very simple definition.

"Antithesis: person or thing that is the direct opposite of someone or something else."

While this was an easy description for him to understand, he didn't see how it applied to gems. When he considered the effect of B-stone, did this gem possess the ability to neutralize the effect of other gems?

"Maybe its power is even greater than that!"

Ves experimentally retrieved some of his other gems and put them close to an Antithesis Gem. Nothing happened, but he separated them anyway just to be safe. He didn't want any of his other gems to lose their potency.

Just like the question marks in their description, the gems remained a mystery. Ves wasn't really sure what would happen if he embedded them in a mech.

He had some guesses, though.

"These gems are most suited to the Sanctuary or any other mech presided over by Lufa."

Perhaps such a mech would gain powerful neutralizing abilities that were capable of negating spiritual energy and other manifestations of power.

"What if.. I use them myself?"

For a moment, he felt tempted to embed a into his Unending Regalia. He reluctantly set aside this plan when he considered that the effects of Lucky's gems were usually exclusive to mechs. He also felt that it might be a bad idea to keep them on his person for a lengthy amount of time.

As a mech designer and spiritual engineer, it was essential for him to manipulate spiritual energy. Constant contact with a gem that might very well interfere with that was just asking for trouble.

After he made this guess, Ves resolutely decided to put them in his vault rather than in one of his pockets.

Once he took care of that, he collected his thoughts before turning his attention back to his main work.

"I've already fooled around long enough. Let's get back to completing my remaining design projects."

After finishing the Crystal Lord Mark II, Sanctuary and Chiron designs, he only needed to tackle three more before he cleared the board.

Of the three that remained, the Valkyrie Redeemer Project was the most important to him. Introducing the Blessed Squire to the Hexers caused them to change the way they fought against the Fridaymen, mostly for the better.

A fair amount of time had passed since the LMC introduced a global update across all of its current mech models.

Every opponent who fought LMC mechs in battle faced much trickier circumstances now that they were capable of manipulating the range of their glows!

This presented a great advantage to every LMC mech, not just the Blessed Squires and the altered Doom Guards.

Certainly, the two aforementioned mech models gained the greatest boost in value.

After tricking the Fridaymen many times, they finally learned their lesson. Before the release of the retraction dial update, the Glow Crusher reigned supreme among the counters of LMC mechs.

Now that the mech pilots of the Blessed Squires became very proficient in controlling the radius of their glows, there was almost no chance that Master Olson and Master Katzenberg's work succeeded in crushing any glows!

In order to fulfill its original function, the Glow Crusher had to discharge its accumulated motion energy directly into a Blessed Squire.

This was incredibly difficult to achieve! With the amount of protection that Hexers afforded to their Blessed Squires, the Glow Crushers rapidly diminished in importance.

Ves grinned as he read through the reports and watched some of the latest battle footage. Skillful use of the retraction dial provided other benefits as well. The smaller the radius, the more resilient the glow. The Hex Army increasingly favored deploying multiple Blessed Squires in a single formation, but with their dials set half-way.

While this massively reduced the range of their influence, their glows gained just enough resilience to withstand the pressure of individual counters.

"This is quite clever."

The battle tactics developed by the enterprising and ambitious commanders of the Hex Army were very novel.

Not only that, but once any of them developed a clever tactic, the Hex Army quickly propagated them to other units.

Since the mech divisions and mech regiments of the Hex Army were much more homogenous than the forces of other local states, they encountered significantly less barriers to sharing know-how and best practices. What worked in one unit of Hexers typically worked in many other units of Hexers.

This was not the case for the Friday Coalition. First, each partner organized its own separate military mech armies. Second, each mech division and mech regiment adopted their own distinct traditions, tactics, mech designs and so on. This severely hampered their ability to form a broad and unified response.

Of course, the high degree of uniformity in the Hex Army wasn't without flaw. Just as the Glow Crusher had proved, a single counter successfully weakened the Hexers as a whole!

It was fortunate that Ves managed to come up with a quick response by implementing the retraction dial. Not every designer was able to solve this kind of problem with ease.

Ves was sure this wasn't the end of it. He could smell the vengeful Fridaymen cooking up yet another way to crush his work.

To be honest, he wanted to delay the completion of the Valkyrie Redeemer until the Fridaymen made a move in the second round of their little competition.

Gloriana hit back at his proposal.

"DO YOU KNOW HOW LONG I'VE WAITED FOR YOU TO BE DONE WITH YOUR FRIVOLOUS GAMES?! THE HEX ARMY IS STARVING FOR OUR MECHS, VES! NOW STOP DILLY-DALLYING AROUND AND DO YOUR PART SO WE CAN FINALLY HAND OVER THE VALKYRIE REDEEMER DESIGN TO THE HEGEMONY!"

Faced with such an impassioned demand, Ves could only acquiesce.

"It'll be okay." Ves comforted himself. "I can just publish an update just like before when the Fridaymen come up with their second response."

He studied the second-class light aerial marauder mech design in detail. The technical design work was already complete for the most part. Gloriana clearly showered it with a lot of attention as Ves discovered that it had gone through four iterations.

In fact, according to the logs, she even worked together with some of the institutions of the Hex Army to gather the most comprehensive test data and provide her with numerous helpful suggestions!

It didn't take much effort for Ves to discover that these very clever suggestions came from Hexer mech designers.

While they were so repelled at the thought of contributing to a mech design that was tainted by a male mech designer, the snobby Hexers had no qualms offering their advice anonymously.

Ves frowned a bit. "Meddling cows."

Regardless, the insightful suggestions allowed Gloriana to optimize the Valkyrie Redeemer design to a far greater extent than usual. The performance of the latest prototype exceeded his estimates by at least five percent.

"That is quite a difference!"

One of the reasons the Hexers invested so heavily in the Valkyrie Redeemer was because it was a female mech design. As a mech that was meant to be used by the

superior gender, the Hexers wanted to make sure that their most important soldiers received the best!

Though Ves was not pleased that his territory was being encroached upon, he knew that he had to abide by the demands of his clients.

Technically, Ves answered to DIVA, but these days the Hex Army took over from the intelligence agency and liaised directly with the Miracle Couple.

"Maybe I should impose some rules next time." He considered. "It's one thing to listen to my clients. It's another thing to let them walk all over me! I'm not the kind of boy who likes being stepped upon!"

Chapter 2449: Auto-Enhancement

Ves did not like other mech designers meddling into his projects.

Sure, he was not against cooperating with other mech designers. The important point was that he agreed to it. He gladly collaborated with Gloriana due to the fantastic synergy they achieved. That did not mean he was in favor of getting help from others, especially when he didn't have a say in the matter!

Fortunately, the violation this time was light. As Ves carefully studied the latest iteration of the Valkyrie Redeemer design, he clearly noted traces that resembled Gloriana's design style but not entirely.

He knew how his partner designed her mechs. She was ambitious but also exceedingly perfectionist. She constantly struggled to balance her urges, and sometimes she failed, much to her chagrin.

What was odd about the current design was that Ves no longer spotted any of these quirks. All of the areas that were usually prone to suboptimal solutions looked suspiciously polished in his eyes.

Every mech designer possessed a different style. Even the blandest design style still stood out in some way.

To Ves, the Valkyrie Redeemer was like a glass of water with a few extra fingerprints on its surface. It was still a glass of water, but who knew who already took a sip at it while he was looking away.

"Well, at least the meddlers didn't try to change anything substantial."

The overall character and performance profile of the Valkyrie Redeemer remained unchanged. It was just a little bit better at performing its purpose due to the additional optimization it received.

Ves could easily guess why that was so. "The Hexer Masters probably didn't hold themselves back out of the goodness of their hearts. They're just afraid they'll ruin the glow of the mech."

Without his intervention or guidance, anyone who implemented major changes to the design quickly tarnished its spiritual foundation.

He had to spend a lot of effort in instructing Gloriana to keep her mind focused and free of distractions in order to minimize the impact, and even then she still muddled up the spiritual foundation sometimes.

The problem was so much worse for stronger mech designers who exerted a disproportionately powerful impact on any design they worked on! With the strength of a Master, they could easily wipe out the glow of a mech entirely if they invested themselves in a design!

This was actually one of the hidden reasons why there were no good variants of LMC mechs. The mech designers who were best positioned to develop them were also the most likely to ruin their spiritual nature!

Considering that the Hex Army just happened to be the client, Ves did not begrudge the Hexers too much. The quality of the Valkyrie Redeemer design directly impacted the lives of their mech pilots and many other citizens.

A 5 percent difference in performance might sound minor, but this margin might prevent the Hexers from losing tens of thousands of mech pilots over the course of the Komodo War!

"One of the fundamental flaws of this commission is that we didn't account for the increase in scope. The mechs I've promised to the Hexers are too important to be left in the hands of two Journeymen."

There was too much at stake in a war that affected an entire star sector. The fate of trillions of lives and a large amount of states hung in the balance. This was why the works of Master Mech Designers dominated the rosters of mech militaries.

States wanted to fight with the best machines that they could get! Why settle for the rough and immature designs of Journeymen when they could easily obtain something better from Masters?

The oddity here was that neither Ves nor DIVA anticipated that the Hegemony as a whole embraced the Blessed Squire so quickly.

In his discussions with Calabast, she often brought up the intense bias towards mechs designed by boys.

The notoriously strict and female-centric council of matriarchs literally burned any applications sent by boys without even taking a glance at them! To the matriarchs, the moment Hexadric Hegemony resorted to mechs designed by boys, their state had already fallen!

Ves snorted in disgust. "It turns out you're not so principled after all. I guess reality sometimes has a way of whacking some sense in fanatics."

The actual Hexers fighting against the Fridaymen in the trenches did not care as much for ideological purity. They just wanted effective solutions, and a pair of Journeymen just happened to meet their demands.

With his glows, Ves possessed a unique advantage that the Hexers weren't able to assail. This gave the Hexer leaders little choice but to make an exception to the rules.

A part of him admired the burst of pragmatism from the Hexers. As long as they weren't unreasonable to the point of absurdity, Ves did not have too many qualms of working for them. An honest mech designer and businessman should always uphold his end of a deal.

"I have principles, after all."

As Ves continued to study and work on the Valkyrie Redeemer design, he became increasingly more eager to see it in action.

Different from the Blessed Squire, the Valkyrie Redeemer was a female-centric mech design. Its budget was double that of the Blessed Squire despite being considerably lighter and smaller. Every square meter of mech was packed with advanced components and exceptional alloys.

Armed with a short spear, hexagon-shaped shield and pulse submachine gun, the aerial marauder mech possessed a versatile loadout that was tailor-made for independent raiding and harassment missions.

The Valkyrie Redeemer was arguably the most powerful and most impactful mech he had designed up until now! Certainly, the Devil Tiger and the Ouroboros were vastly more expensive and exceptional, but they were outliers as far as he was concerned.

Unlike those one-off mechs, the Valkyrie Redeemer was a standard military mech design that was likely to be used by millions of highly-trained military mech pilots. The women who were slated to pilot it would probably go on to achieve great victories that they couldn't have achieved with any other machine.

Ves briefly felt burdened by the sheer amount of influence of this mech design. A lot of people were paying attention to his next entry into the Komodo War. If the Valkyrie

Redeemer somehow fell flat, then not only would he lose a huge amount of reputation, but he might indirectly contribute to the additional deaths and suffering of many Hexers!

"Why am I so nervous? I've always shouldered this burden ever since I sold my first Marc Antony."

The biggest difference was that the scope had increased. The influence of a single, cheap variant was countless times less than a new military mech model that might decide whether the Hex Army succeeded in overrunning the Carnegie Group!

"Well, I can only do what I can. Let's finalize this mech design."

He already added two triggered abilities to the design. They were the defining traits of the Valkyrie Redeemer and would likely become synonymous with the design.

Considering that he designed the abilities before he made some major advances in the field of spiritual engineering, he saw plenty of room for improvements. He resolutely broke up the spiritual constructs that carried the abilities and rebuilt them from the ground up with several advancements in mind.

He first tackled the Shock Pulse ability that was designed to work in tandem with Valkyrie Redeemer's Starburst grenades. Inspired by the rapid emotional disorientation induced by the new Doom Guards, he added strong emotional components to the pulsing discharge.

"Hehehe." He chuckled. "It's not enough to shock the enemy's minds and spirits. I want them to be awed as well so that they will worship the valkyries as they die!"

He always enjoyed developing more creative ways to kill. The entire point of designing mechs, especially those purposed for the military, was to increase their lethality to the limit!

By adding an awe effect that was closely related to the Superior Mother, the new Shock Pulse became even more difficult to shrug off. The Blessed Squire's performance on the battlefield already proved that even elite Fridaymen mech pilots weren't immune to the disruption that emotional changes could bring.

"They're still human underneath their fearsome shells."

Considering the alterations he made, he might as well adjust the name of the ability to Shock And Awe Pulse.

"It's quite a good combination! No wonder it's a classic!"

The changes he made to the short-ranged triggered ability paled in comparison to what he did next.

The Marked For Death ability drastically narrowed the angle of the glow so that it was effectively able to affect a distant target.

As Ves broke down and rebuilt the spiritual construct responsible for this ability, he integrated the functionality of the retraction dial into it. This allowed the mech pilot to selectively reduce the range in order to affect multiple opponents with its suppressive glow.

He also tweaked the death-based glow in order to increase its effectiveness at inducing terror.

Nyxie along with the dark gods of the Nyxian Gap had taught him plenty about suppressing people through spiritual means. While he wasn't able to replicate their methods entirely, he was able to imitate a small portion of their effects.

The final change he made to the ability was that the Valkyrie Redeemers could pool and superimpose their targeted glows more effectively.

When it came to glows, $1 + 1$ did not equal 2. Most of the time, the strengthening resulting from overlapping glows mostly led to a modest increase such as 1.05.

What Ves had done was to introduce some slight variance to the individual glow signature of every unique mech.

Because each Valkyrie Redeemer exerted a slightly different glow, Ves theorized that overlapping them together might be able to induce vastly greater emotional turmoil towards the targets!

"It's boring when everything is the same. Just making every little glow a little more unique will doubtlessly add some excitement!"

He was very proud when he came up with this little trick. While he hadn't tested it out, he was certain it would work out the way he envisioned. If he happened to be wrong, he could always correct the mech design.

"Unlike other mech designers, I don't need to go through any approval process to alter my mechs!"

It only took hours for him to upgrade the abilities. Just as before, the two triggered abilities were also alive. Infused with a small amount of his spiritual energy, they were capable of growing and evolving over time, though in what way, even Ves didn't know!

In theory, the triggered abilities evolved according to the wants and needs of the mech, the design spirit and the mech pilot.

If they wanted to increase the range of the Marked For Death ability, then the spiritual construct responsible for it would aim for this improvement at the expense of other possible choices.

If a lot of Hexer mech pilots wanted to abuse the Shock And Awe ability even further, then the Shock And Awe ability would likely experience greater growth.

"Resources are limited. Not everything can be improved at once."

After he was done with revising the triggered abilities, he directed his attention to the other spiritual aspects of his mech design. He smoothed out anything that looked sloppy and built up and added some additional elements that strengthened the Valkyrie Redeemer's spiritual character.

In particular, he made sure to set it up for individual growth and development. While Ves wasn't willing to set up any mechanisms that induced the Superior Mother to invest some of her energy to enhance the spiritual foundations of the mechs, he did open up a door for other sources.

"If the mech pilot can pay the price herself, then by all means do it! Just don't ask for a handout from my mother!"

Inspired by the changes to the Quint, any mech pilot who advanced to expert candidate or expert pilot was able to enhance their individual Valkyrie Redeemers.

While Ves risked exposure when he implemented this quirk, he couldn't resist adding it in once he conceived of the idea.

He really wanted to develop methods of enhancing his mechs without relying on himself or his design spirits to make a move. By implementing a secret auto-enhancement function, Ves hoped that this solution might be able to deflect some suspicion in the future!

Chapter 2450: Ves the Great Scientist

Ves felt quite accomplished after he completed his work on the Valkyrie Redeemer design.

The auto-enhancement function he developed was a more purposeful way of enhancing the spiritual foundations of his mechs.

Even without this function, his mechs would have gained a boost regardless, but the process wouldn't be as efficient.

Now, any mech that was lucky enough to be the carrier of a breakthrough would definitely be rewarded for its contribution. It was only fair for the lucky mech pilot to share some of the benefits.

Just to be sure, Ves implemented a hard ceiling of 25 percent saturation of base foundation.

At 50 percent saturation, the mech in question became capable of killing its own pilot. While the odds of this happening were very minor, the fact that the victims all consisted of mech pilots with spiritual potential would have massive repercussions.

Ves did not want to be responsible for killing off an entire population of future expert pilots!

"The MTA will definitely hunt me down once it finds out!"

He set the limit at a percentage of the base foundation because he needed to account for expansions of the pool.

Considering that referring to percentages of saturation of base foundation quickly got tiring, Ves invented a new unit of measure to express the level of enhancement of any given mech.

"As the inventor of this new and unprecedented phenomenon, I have the right to call it however I like. Since I'm naming a new unit of measurement, let's call it.. the Ves scale!"

Of all of the possible choices he could make, he settled for his own name! An intense wave of pride and accomplishment burst from his mind!

"Yes! That's it! What a brilliant choice! I deserve a prize for my fantastic naming sense! Hahaha!"

As Ves erupted in laughter, Lucky woke up from his nap and studied the current state of his owner.

"Meow!"

The cat recognized that type of laughter and instantly knew he needed to be somewhere else! He quickly phased his body and dove straight through the deck!

Ves took no notice of his cat. Instead, he became engrossed with the illusion that he had joined the ranks of the greatest scientists of human civilization!

Many pioneers in science who discovered and quantified a new unit of measurement put forward their own names. This was an ancient and long-standing custom in the scientific community.

"As long as other qualified people accept my unit of measurement, then it's settled!"

Right now, Ves was the only one who was versed in spiritual foundation enhancement. The rest of human civilization had no clue what the Ves scale actually stood for. This meant that his voice was the only one that mattered.

As Ves cast his vote on his suggestion, he won the naming competition by default. After all, he won 1 out of 1 total votes!

"I have made history today! Hahahahaha!"

In his mind, he had reasons to be proud. He formally joined the ranks of other shameless scientists such as Isaac Newton, Blaise Pascal, Anders Celcius, James Watt, James Prescott Joule, Heinrich Rudolf Hertz and many other people that often showed up in science textbooks.

Perhaps in the distant future where he finally felt secure enough to publicize his methods, every mech designer would eventually make use of the Ves scale throughout human space!

To define the unit of measurement, he arbitrarily equated 25 percent saturation of the base spiritual foundation of a fresh Bright Warrior mech to 25 Ves.

Since each mech was able to grow their spiritual foundation over time, thereby stretching what a certain percentage of saturation actually meant, it was important for him to come up with an absolute rather than a relative unit of measurement.

After all, 25 percent of a single glass of water was a lot smaller than 25 percent of an entire swimming pool!

He made sure to record the degree of strength that corresponded to different amounts of Ves in to calibrate his internal Ves meter.

"Alright, that's done!"

Once he was done with admiring his new unit of measurement, he turned his attention back to the Valkyrie Redeemer. So far, it was the only mech design that incorporated the experimental new auto-enhancement function.

"Its target audience shouldn't be weak, but just to be sure, it's best not to exceed 25 Ves for any LMC mech used by outsiders.

LMC mechs with 50 Ves already became deadly. Machines with 100 Ves became deathtraps to every mech pilot that induced the hostility of their own machines.

The relationship between the mech and mech pilot mattered a lot! An LMC mech with 100 Ves could still offer a huge amount of help to mech pilots that truly respected it and treated it with care.

Yet because Ves couldn't account for the behavior of mech pilots outside of his clan, he needed to take the worst-case scenario into account.

"If there are any Hexer mech pilots in the Hex Army who frequently abuse their own mechs, then I don't want to be responsible if their machines hit back!"

Aside from shielding him from liability, setting a hard cap of 25 Ves also ensured that his products wouldn't attract too much attention from the public.

While any mech that reached 25 Ves was still able to grow and develop a unique character remarkably quickly, only a few mechs would ever be able to hit this maximum. The odds of mech pilots of the Valkyrie Redeemers breaking through was miniscule, and the advancement of expert candidates did not unleash as much energy as true apotheosis.

"Even if the chances are small, I can't endanger the few winners."

For now, it was only safe to handle mechs with higher Ves if Ves directly controlled their usage. He could only do so if the mechs remained in his clan.

The mechs piloted by the expert pilots when they broke through during the previous battle were all off-limits to others. The Quint that measured a whopping 150 Ves was the most dangerous of the surviving custom mechs.

Even if the masterwork mech did not mean to harm any Larkinson mech pilots, its presence alone was enough to crush a mech pilot's head!

The Quint was sacred to Ves. He did not want one of his greatest works to tarnish itself by bearing the guilt of killing one of its own users!

In order to ensure that no one developed any crooked ideas about mechs such as the Quint, Ves wrote up a formal order and passed it to Major Verle. The clan needed to impose a new structure to restrict the usage of the most dangerous mechs.

In addition, he also wanted to explore ways to set up a reward structure around spiritual enhancement.

Mech pilots that earned a lot of Larkinson merits in battle or elsewhere should be allowed to exchange them for boosting their assigned mechs.

Right now, he wasn't sure whether it was still necessary to enhance the foundations of the mechs used by his clansmen. With 5 expert pilots and 9 expert candidates, the Larkinson Clan could not handle any more breakthroughs.

"It will be different in the future."

When the Larkinson Clan expanded and matured, he wanted his mech forces to have a structure in place that automatically enhanced every LMC mech by a modest amount. That was the extent of the freebie that mech pilots received.

"If they want more, they have to work for it. This is the best solution."

People cherished something less if they did not have to sacrifice anything to obtain it. Ves wanted to keep his mech pilots motivated, so dangling this mysterious reward after some time would definitely give them another reason to push themselves.

With that out of the way, he returned to the Valkyrie Redeemer design and carefully inspected it from top to bottom several times. Once he made sure that the mech did not contain any problematic issues, he packaged up the files and sent them to Gloriana.

Sure enough, she called him less than a minute later.

"You've finished the Valkyrie Redeemer design?" She asked with a hopeful glint in her eyes.

Vs nodded. "Yes. I've updated the documentation to describe the changes I've made to its glow and.. some other aspects. In particular, the retraction dial opens up a lot more options. The glow of the Valkyrie Redeemer has definitely become more remarkable."

The one regret he had was that the mech may score high on uniformity, it did not offer that much individuality. The auto-enhancement function helped a bit, but it was effectively limited to expert candidates.

That did not conform with his desires. Ves constantly sought new ways to improve the performance of regular mech pilots, not the privileged elites.

Gloriana quickly studied the updated design files. She stared long and hard at the design schematics. Though she couldn't see the changes that Ves had made, she could feel them, if only a little bit. Her perception of spiritual energy was still lacking.

"The mech feels.. more real. More emotional. More eager to deliver death." She spoke. "I'm quite happy with it! Compared to the Blessed Squire, the Valkyrie Redeemer is more advanced in every way. We can truly prove to the Hegemony that our work is transformational."

She rambled for a few minutes how it was a great honor to help the Hegemony crush the Coalition and 'liberate' the entire star sector.

"So what will you do with the design now that it's complete?" He asked.

"Ah, as I said, I'll handle our communications with the Hegemony. I will send it to the Hex Army and some government institutions so that they can rigorously test and verify our work. As long as they don't spot any serious flaws, the Hex Army will soon be able to field them in battle."

"How long will that take?"

"The stakes are higher, now. While our mechs are powerful, the Hexers are also apprehensive at their effects. They need to perform much more rigorous testing than we have ever performed. I would say the Valkyrie Redeemer will truly make its debut in one or two months."

"That's a rather long time."

"It would have been far longer if there wasn't a war going on. The Hex Army is usually very strict when it comes to introducing new mech models into its lineup."

"Maybe the mech will finally be able to show off its prowess at the date of our wedding. That would be a nice wedding gift."

"What a great idea!" Gloriana gushed. "I will definitely have to pass on this suggestion to the Hegemony. All of the foreign dignitaries that we've invited to the wedding will doubtlessly become impressed when they see how easily our Valkyrie Redeemers are able to crush the Fridaymen!"

They chatted a bit more about the design. Ves tried his best to convey some of what improved or added without going into details. As Gloriana was already familiar with his work, she was able to figure out a lot by herself.

"The Valkyrie Redeemer marks another evolution in my development." Ves summed up. "The innovations I've implemented have made this mech very different from our previous works. Every mech we design in the future will at least be able to reach this standard."

Both of them were happy with what they accomplished. Just like Ves, Gloriana accomplished some breakthroughs of her own. She had finally begun to digest the many insights she harvested from examining the masterwork mechs and receiving instruction from Master Willix.

If she hadn't improved by such a considerable margin, then the anonymous mech designers who optimized the Valkyrie Redeemer would have been able to make a greater difference.

Ves already looked forward to the next wave of mech design projects. He wanted to translate all of his gains into better mechs, both for the Hex Army and the Larkinson Clan!

He wanted to design so many mechs that he felt that the current limits were not enough anymore. Engaging in just 2 major design projects and 4 minor design projects meant that Ves would have to spend years to finish all of the high-priority mech designs on his agenda!

"Honey?"

"What is it, Ves?"

"Have you ever thought about expanding the Design Department?"