

Mech 3301

Chapter 3301: Louder Song

After the battle, the Larkinson expert mechs had all been moved to the personal workshops on the Spirit of Bentheim.

As with any intensive battle, no mech was able to come out unscathed. Some of the frames were in better shape than others, but no matter their current condition, they all required personal attention in order to restore their peak battle effectiveness.

When Ves entered the workshop, he approached his wife who was currently wearing a fashionable hazard suit. Just like her other gear, it was covered with a symbol pattern that made it seem as if she was about to walk on a catwalk instead of working on a fleet that was still traveling behind enemy lines.

When Ves embraced his wife from behind, he had to be careful not to put too much pressure on her. His Unending Regalia distorted his movements and forced him to employ more strength to move around all of that metal.

As Ves took a deep whiff of her scent, Gloriana grew annoyed and tried to push him away.

"Don't do that. Your combat armor is too cold and it feels weird as well. I don't know why you insist on wearing something so excessive when we're in the middle of our fleet. No one can get past all of your layers of security, especially inside a ship filled with Larkinsons!"

Ves shrugged as he let her go. "It's better to be safe than sorry. In my opinion, you should also wear something that offers more protection. I don't think your hazard suit offers much protection for our baby. If you want, we can shave some more Unending alloy from the Shield of Samar to build another protective suit."

"No thanks. Don't underestimate my outfit. I paid good money for this and it offers a lot more protection and cushioning than you think. Besides, I can't perform precision repairs when my limbs are being weighed down by all of that heavy metal."

This was indeed a serious problem. Ves wasn't affected by the high density of Unending alloy due to his unnatural physical strength and endurance, but Gloriana did not possess any physical enhancements.

Her attitude towards him wasn't pleasant at the moment, and it was his fault. They already had a shouting match a few days ago where Gloriana loudly complained about how he squandered four precious gems on expert mechs that were already built!

From her perspective, Ves just wasted four good opportunities to turn a high-quality mech into a masterwork!

Though Ves was not unsympathetic towards her opinion, he did not regret using up his available resources. The performance of his expert mechs during the previous battle fully vindicated his decision.

The Unstable Chaos Essence gem granted the Riot an unpredictable defensive enhancement that saved it from destruction.

The Bastet's Favor gem caused the First Sword to unleash a sharper battle formation attack and also wound the dwarven expert mechs with significantly greater ease.

The Bastet's Regard gem bestowed the Dark Zephyr the agility it needed to evade the Gauss Baron's targeted bombardment with greater ease and also improved its ability to outmaneuver enemy mechs at close range.

The Bastet's Affection gem provided the Amaranto with a crucial all-round firepower boost that amplified its formidable offensive capabilities to an entirely different height!

Venerable Stark would have never been able to steal the show and cripple eight expert mechs in quick succession without the amazing 20 percent damage boost provided by the gem that Ves had sacrificed!

Even though he could have saved it up until he could make another ranged expert mech into a fantastic masterwork, he was more than willing to give up this opportunity.

Ves had a long life and career ahead of him. The premise was that he was able to maintain his life and freedom, and that was something that Gloriana wasn't properly considering.

As someone who dealt with risk many times, even he knew that there were instances where he needed to make the safest choice instead of allowing his greed to overcome his common sense!

After a moment of silence, the wedded couple eventually discussed their work.

"The Riot is in the worst shape out of all of our expert mechs." She gestured towards the torso that hung like a carcass in a primitive abattoir. "The three limbs it lost are in such poor shape that they need to be reconstructed from scratch in order to restore their full integrity."

Ves did not have much of an opinion of this. "It's okay. We planned to refit and upgrade the internal architecture anyway, so we were planning to pull out the internal components anyway."

Gloriana nodded. "I think we can perform some minor tweaks and adjustments to the overall design so that the new replacement components can withstand external shocks a little better. I can do this work myself."

"Don't spend too much time on these upgrades. Keep them minor. We should wait until we have settled into the Red Ocean before we implement any major overhauls to our expert mechs. The tech and materials that are available over there is a lot better than what we have access to at the moment."

"I already know that, Ves. I would have preferred it if we could postpone the completion of the Bulwark Project and the Chimera Project so that we can take advantage of the better conditions on the other side of the beyonder gate."

He firmly shook his head. "We already talked about this. We can't keep pushing up our expectations for our projects and engage in feature creep. We set a firm vision in mind of the expert mechs that we wanted to provide to Joshua and Jannzi. Our original concepts are already more than sufficient. They have already been waiting for their expert mechs for a long time and their patience is running out. It is also highly detrimental to their future progression if their practice is delayed by another year. I'm sorry, Gloriana, but you'll just have to wait until we can bring our expert mechs up to the standards of the Red Ocean another time."

Ves was also eager to move on from working on expert mechs. While he loved their awe-inspiring power and their greater potential, a mech designer like him wanted to serve many kinds of mech pilots. He had not forgotten about the masses and the recent battle provided him with an immense amount of inspiration for his future mass production models.

Before the Battle of Fordilla Zentra occurred, the concept of designing a series of mechs that were all meant to cooperate seamlessly in combat had been a bit abstract to Ves. Though the Mech Corps of the Bright Republic already showed this mode of combat to a certain degree, the rather basic tech and means available to third-class military organizations limited their toolbox.

Second-class militaries possessed a lot more options. The many battles between the Friday Coalition and the Hex Army featured multiple layers of synergy and cooperation between different mech models, but the scale and scope of them was too grand for him to fully comprehend all of this depth at the time.

It was only when he personally witnessed a battle of this level unfold in front of him that his eyes were fully opened. The direct comparison between the simplistic mech roster of the Larkinson Army and the more logical and well-planned mech roster of the three Ferril mech divisions made it abundantly clear that a good mix of mech models provided a lot of additional battle effectiveness without requiring any extra investment!

Ves was eager to apply this approach to his own mech legions. He already came up with dozens of different ideas that he couldn't wait to discuss with the legion commanders!

Of course, first he needed to conclude the current round of mech design projects. He not only had to finish the Bulwark Project and the Chimera Project, but also complete his work on a new expert rifleman mech for Venerable Brutus!

His priorities kept growing. If he didn't invest enough time on addressing them, they would continue to pile up until he ended up with a mountain of uncompleted projects!

Since he was eager to prevent that from happening, he immediately turned his attention back to his current work.

He examined the condition of the different expert mechs up close in person so that he knew exactly what he needed to do for the coming weeks.

The Amaranto required the least amount of work to repair, but neither Ves nor Gloriana felt confident about outsourcing the maintenance work to a crew of mech technicians.

"The Amaranto is a masterpiece and it needs to stay that way. I'll perform the repairs myself." Gloriana demanded.

The Dark Zephyr, the Riot and the First Sword weren't masterworks and did not impose any exaggerated demands.

However, the Larkinson Clan was short on highly-qualified mech technicians that possessed the skill and experience to perform independent repairs and adjustments to expert mechs.

Ves and the other Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan had to supervise all of the necessary work in person.

"It's going to cost us a fair amount of time to design a minor refit." He said. "That will delay the refit for at least a week."

Given all of the time-consuming steps they needed to perform, Ves was afraid that it would take a month before the Larkinson Clan was able to field four fully-functional expert mechs.

Fortunately, the dwarves shouldn't be able to threaten the expeditionary fleet in this timespan. Even if the Vulcan Empire was suicidal enough to launch a surprise attack on the Empire of the Lost, the Larkinson Clan wasn't anchored to the Amswick System. The fleet could leave at any time!

When Ves and his wife reached the damaged frame of the First Sword, another mech designer happened to be present.

Ketis, who wore a formidable suit of combat armor of her own, gazed up at the expert swordsman mech with affection.

The Decapitator was resting right next to it. In order to prevent any accidents, its gigantic blade was covered by a giant metal sheath.

"Are you happy, Ketis?" Ves asked.

The tired woman nodded without saying a word.

Her force of will and metal strength had yet to return to their peak. Ves was concerned about that, but Ketis was made out of sterner stuff. She was not only a transcendent in two different professions, but Sharpie was also helping her recover her energies.

He estimated that she would return to her peak within a month, which was quite impressive despite not having a companion spirit like Blinky.

"That was a really nice trick you pulled off during the battle." Ves remarked. He did not hide his appreciation for her actions. "I didn't know that was possible, but once I realized what you had done, I tried it out myself. If we hadn't made our moves, who knows how many more Larkinsons would have perished."

His wife looked confused. She didn't know what her husband and his student were talking about.

Ketis smiled. "I did it for Venerable Dise. To be honest, I wasn't quite aware I could do that either. It's just... I always felt that I was in tune with the Decapitator. I spent hours of my spare time staying close to it. The sword sings to me, you know. Every good sword does that, but the ones that I've made myself ring clearer to me than anything else. At some point, I found that I could still 'hear' the Decapitator singing to me even when I had returned to my stateroom. I first thought it was just a lingering dream, but when Venerable Dise fought with it for the first time... the singing grew louder."

Ves became completely engrossed in her story. Though Ketis obviously found it difficult to describe her experiences, Ves did not fail to recognize that the objects that she was interacting with were alive in their own way!

Chapter 3302: Different Life

With the progression of his design philosophy, Ves could easily make a living product if he wanted to.

In fact, the instinct of bestowing life to his creations was so ingrained these days that he consciously had to mess up his own work if he wanted to produce a lifeless object!

While he was glad of his improvement, he sometimes felt lonely. As the pioneer of this new field in mech design, Ves had to rely on himself to invent all of the theories and methods that allowed him to make better living products.

This inevitably led to a lack of diversity and perspective. Because every living product or mech design came from him, the forms they took inevitably conformed to a single monotonous pattern, his pattern.

It was like baking an old-fashioned cake with only one type of mold. If Ves only became exposed to a circular mold in his career, all of the cakes he baked would come in the same shape without any meaningful variety!

This was why Ves was so pleased with encountering Ketis' work. She had clearly inherited some of the concepts of living products from him, but she did not possess a domain that was oriented towards life.

Nonetheless, she managed to develop her own means to create a living product that fit her own talents!

The outcome was similar but the approach was different. The mold she used to bake her unique cakes was different. Hers was rectangular, which resulted in cakes that looked substantially different.

Yet as long as someone tasted a slice of their cakes, that person would find that the ones baked by Ves and Ketis had a lot in common!

Ves was intrigued by the similarities and differences between their works. The Decapitator was almost entirely designed by Ketis and represented her unique strengths the best.

At this distance, he could clearly sense that the Decapitator was alive in some way, but it was different from what he was accustomed to. While it did possess a spiritual foundation like his own work, it was configured in a radically different form than he was accustomed to. There was much less life and a lot more... purpose, for a lack of a better word.

It was like the difference between an animal cell and a plant cell. Both types of organic cells possessed different traits that ultimately produced different lifeforms.

An ordinary animal cell was flexible and morphable, allowing for the emergence of creatures that could move with ease.

An ordinary plant cell was lined with cellulose, which caused it to become more solid and rigid. This produced plants that were stiff and unmoving.

Yet no matter whether Ves was looking at an animal or a plant, both of them were alive. They just worked in different ways.

Did this mean that Ves, who was accustomed to designing mechs like animals, suddenly thought it was a good idea to design mechs like plants?

Not necessarily. He knew what he was good at and what he wasn't good at. Creating an exceptional sword character on products like the Decapitator was something that only Ketis and possibly her inheritors could master.

At best, Ves could attempt to imitate her approach, but without her domain along with her passion and obsession for swordsmanship, his copies would probably be only a tenth as effective as hers, and that was just a generous estimate.

Ves possessed his own strengths and it was much better if he continued to develop his own approach on living mechs. His products shouldn't be any weaker from that of Ketis. They just possessed different strengths. It was up to the customer to decide which one met their needs and solved their problems better.

That said, it was still helpful for him to broaden his perspective by exploring different takes on living products.

The new Remote Energy Channeling method that Ves had added to his toolbox was directly inspired by Ketis, after all! This was actually a rare case where he was able to apply the same method as hers without needing to make any substantial changes.

Ves even wondered if he could 'obtain' even more solutions once he passed on his teachings to more students. Though Maikel and Zanthar were a bit too far away from becoming Journeymen themselves, he had high hopes for their future!

"What do you actually mean when you say your swords are singing to you?" He asked with obvious interest in his tone. "I've tried to hear this supposed song many times but I haven't even heard a peep from the Decapitator."

Ketis smirked. "That's because you perceive them in a different way from mine. You're not a swordsman or even a warrior, so you don't understand how people like myself treat their weapons. A good weapon is more than a tool. It's a partner who you entrust your life with. When you spend so much time mastering and getting to know your weapon, you will find that it will sing to you at one point. At least, that's the way that I experience it. My weapons sing to my soul instead of my ears."

Ves looked confused. If he wasn't wearing his Unending Regalia, he would have scratched his head by now!

"It sounds like we perceive life in different ways. I mostly perceive it by feel, though in practice I imagine the life that I am working with on a visual level. To me, living products are a wonderful tapestry of art that is constantly evolving."

While Ves continued to talk shop with Ketis, he completely forgot about his wife.

Gloriana looked increasingly upset. The two were completely ignoring her. She didn't understand anything about what they were talking about. Her exposure and comprehension to living mechs was much shallower than theirs, so she lacked the background that could allow her to participate in the discussion as an equal contributor.

Seeing that Ves and Ketis weren't about to stop anytime soon, she simply threw her hands up and decided to complete the remainder of the expert mech survey by herself!

"Let me ask you a question." Ves said. "Did you gain the ability to hear this singing when you advanced to Journeyman and became a swordmaster?"

His student hesitated. "I'm not sure."

"You're not sure?"

"It's... difficult to say. I like to think that I have always been able to hear the songs of my swords. I just experienced it on a more intuitive level back then. I don't rule out the possibility that was all happening in my imagination, but I think I was truly working towards something. After my breakthroughs... I can hear the singing a lot more clearly. It's unmistakable, especially for my Bloodsinger and the Decapitator. Those two stand out from the rest."

Ves hummed for a second. "Can you hear singing from other swords or mechs?"

"Not that well, to be honest. The First Sword sings a different song from that of its sword, and it is also a lot weaker to me. I think I would be able to hear its song a lot better if I designed it by myself."

"That's interesting. We'll need to work on that in our future projects. If the interference from other mech designers keep producing incompatibilities between different design philosophies, then that will make it less worthwhile to collaborate on mech design projects. Do you think this is the reason why the First Sword failed to become a masterwork while the mech sword you were working on succeeded?"

"Maybe. It's just a guess. It sounds logical, but I don't think it's that simple. There are many possible reasons why the First Sword didn't match the quality of the Decapitator. I don't think there's anything fundamentally wrong with the expert mech, though. It's a good fit for Venerable Dise and it has proven its worth in the last battle."

Ves wasn't satisfied with this, though. If there was a potential problem with collaborating with Ketis, then any subsequent swordsman mechs they designed in unison would fail to reach their greatest potential! That sounded like an enormous waste!

"I think we may have put you to work on expert mech design projects too soon." He theorized. "The timing of your breakthrough to Journeyman happened just as our Design Department decided to embark on a batch of expert mech design projects. This has pulled you away from a normal trajectory. Properly speaking, you should spend your first years as a Journeyman working on the basics. You need to know what you are capable of and develop a set of theories and methods that you can use as the foundation of your unique design approach."

"I've been doing that, though! I learned a lot and came up with many different things while I was working on all of the expert mech design projects."

"I know that, but the expert mechs are too high-end for a Journeyman who is just at the starting line. The complexity of mechs like the First Sword are exceedingly high compared to a more regular mech model such as the Bright Warrior. Many of the solutions that Gloriana and I employ on our expert mech designs are all derived from the ones that we have developed for our standard mech designs. This smooth progression from low-end to high-end allows us to implement our respective design approaches with fewer mistakes and consistently high quality."

Ketis frowned. "What are you saying?"

"You wanted to design a swordsman mech all by yourself, right?"

"Yeah. I already told you about the Monster Slayer. Even though it's just a landbound mech design, I'm confident I can develop something that is just as valuable as one of your living mechs!"

"I think this is an excellent initiative. In fact, I think you should design a couple more mechs by yourself. Your mech design career is anything but usual, Ketis. You haven't designed a single mech by yourself that has been produced and is used by actual mech pilots. Have you tried your hand at designing virtual mechs?"

"No. Of course not. That's for amateurs." She huffed.

"Hey, that's a little too harsh. While virtual mechs aren't as good as the real thing, they can still teach you a lot about what I'm talking about."

Seeing that Ketis still showed disdain towards virtual mech design, Ves went back to his original point.

"Much of the design work you have done since you joined the Larkinson Clan went into collaboration projects. You learned how to adjust your own contribution to the work of

others, but you haven't spent enough time learning on how to stand on your own. I think that might be the reason why your design philosophy hasn't fully taken hold in the First Sword's design. You lack the maturity that a proper Journeyman should possess."

Ketis was not a weak-minded person. She held plenty of confidence in her design capabilities!

Yet there was a part of her that did not dismiss this theory. As much as she put a lot of faith in how her status as a swordmaster provided her with a strong advance in relevant design projects, her progression so far was indeed unconventional.

Unlike Ves who designed a lot of mechs on his own before he started to collaborate with Gloriana, she never designed any serious mech during her Novice and Apprentice days!

She began to buy into his suggestion.

"I won't say no to spending a couple of years exploring what I can do by myself, but will it be okay? My own designs will probably lack the advantages of our collaboration projects. I would hate to deliver mech designs to the Swordmaidens or any other client that turn out to be weaker than our collaboration work."

Ves stepped closer and placed his armored hand on her shoulder pad. "Believe in yourself, Ketis. Your swords sing to you, and so should your mechs. They're just as alive as my own work. Once we are done with this round of design projects, I intend to let you loose and handle your own schedule. You can start up as many projects as you like and design whatever mechs you want. This will be your time to show the Swordmaidens and everyone else what you can truly do with your talents!"

Her eyes shone as she thought about how she could prove her strength and capabilities. She felt gratified by his trust in her even though she never fully showed her individual design prowess at this time!

Chapter 3303: The Dead Mech

Ves did not come up with the idea to let Ketis loose on an impulse.

Even if he didn't suspect that Ketis had a problem with designing mechs in collaboration with others, he still would have wanted her to explore her potential without needing to compromise with fellow Journeymen.

In every mech design project where multiple capable mech designers were working together, no one was able to get their way all of the time. Even when someone like Ves or Gloriana made the final call, they could never completely disregard the contributions of others, especially when the work division ensured that the more capable contributors worked on design tasks that they were best at completing.

However, the flaw that people like Master Willix warned about was that long-term work on many collaborations risked eroding a mech designer's ability to handle every aspect well.

This was why Ves wanted her and the other Journeymen of the Design Department to fly solo as well for the next round of mech design projects.

Gloriana, Juliet and Ves himself all needed to go back to their roots and find out what they could accomplish if they weren't able to rely on others to prop up their weaknesses.

There was also a more practical reason why Ves was thinking about letting every Journeyman work on their own design projects by themselves.

"The Larkinson Army needs way more specialized mechs!"

The well-rounded performance of the Ferril Provincial Army's mech divisions showed that there were huge inadequacies in the way the different Larkinson mech units fought in battle. The shortage of mech models and the dominance of the rather plain and boring Bright Warrior model caused his mech pilots to lack sufficiently strong and distinctive tactical options.

Ves was eager to make up for this shortcoming, but he knew that it would take way more than just a handful of mech designs to provide every mech legion with a fitting synergistic mech roster.

So instead of making every Journeyman work together, Ves thought it was more expedient for them to split up. In any case, the Design Department had already expanded in size. There were enough design teams to allow every Journeyman to work on three or four design projects concurrently in a single design round.

"Maybe we can handle even more if I hire another batch of mech designers." He muttered.

He knew that there would be one final opportunity for his clan to recruit a lot of skilled and talented personnel in the near future.

The star systems where the lesser and greater beyonder gates were based had become hotspots for any ambitious person who wanted to go on an adventure to the Red Ocean!

Billions of people who couldn't afford the expense had moved to the gate systems and tried to get hired by the pioneers that passed through.

Of course, many of the people who wanted to get in on the Red Ocean were frankly rubbish. Still, with the sheer amount of manpower that piled up in the gate systems, there were gems everywhere as long as someone looked hard enough.

Special hiring companies had also emerged that specialized in seeking out these brilliant talents. This way, pioneers like Ves didn't have to scour the personnel markets in person and could just pay a fee in order to get a list of potential hires that satisfied his demands.

The only question whether Ves would be able to get enough high-quality personnel was whether his clan was attractive enough for them. He wasn't sure whether the most skilled and promising mech designers and other professionals were willing to get onboard his drunken party boat.

"Well, the recent publicity will likely help with attracting more adventurous and open-minded personnel." Ves guessed. "Our clan needs people with guts, not caution. There are plenty of other alternatives if people can't stomach any excitement."

The personnel market in the Red Ocean was a lot worse than the ones in the Milky Way. Even though a lot of free passengers still managed to flow into the dwarf galaxy, the truly skilled professionals were all locked into long-term contracts.

Perhaps this might change once the first colonies bloomed and a large population base began to emerge from those sites, but at this stage the children who were born in the Red Ocean weren't even old enough to study math!

"Hmmm, I should make sure our clan stuffs our capital ships with people. They're more than big enough to accommodate a huge amount of crew and passengers so we shouldn't be stingy."

Ves was sure that the chief ministers and other leaders in the clan had already made preparations for this, but he intended to check up on whether their recruitment targets were ambitious enough!

In the meantime, he still had to address his current tasks.

"I almost forgot about that."

Gloriana had already gone ahead and completed her survey of the damaged Larkinson expert mechs, but that didn't mean Ves was familiar with their current state.

He read all of the reports and witnessed how much damage they accumulated over the course of the battle, but if he really wanted to understand their condition, he needed to examine them in person.

What was important was that he did not just pay attention to their physical state, but also their spiritual state.

What gratified him was that none of his expert mechs showed any problems in this regard. Even if a machine like the Riot looked like it was a few steps away from becoming a wreck, its spiritual character was still as strong and vigorous as ever.

In fact, the influence of the Unstable Chaos Essence had altered its character and added a touch of madness to the expert mech.

When Ves initially bestowed the gem unto the Riot, Ves was quite fearful of the consequences.

Now that he saw how much value it added, he no longer held any concerns. Lucky's gems were always geared towards helping mechs in some way. That was their basic purpose, so even if their descriptions sounded dubious, the Riot was probably fine.

Ves was able to perceive the changes induced by the gems in the other expert mechs as well. The First Sword gained a sharper vibe while the Amaranto appeared brighter to his senses. These clear differences made him feel better about using up his gems on them even if he didn't get any new masterworks.

"Then there's this." He said in a weary tone as he stopped in front of the remains of the Valkyrie Prime.

The prime mech was in a sad shape. If Venerable Joshua hadn't ejected his cockpit in the nick of time, the Burza Fens would have cleaved right through his body!

The Valkyrie Prime's defeat not only dealt a mental blow to the expert pilot, but also caused his mech to gain a somber vibe. Ves could practically feel the sadness flowing from the broken machine.

This was a strong contrast from his expert mechs, and he suspected he knew why there was a difference.

"You know what is going to happen to you, am I correct?" He asked the ruined prime mech.

His living mechs weren't alive in a conventional sense, but the older and stronger machines tended to possess a greater personality than the younger and weaker ones.

All four expert mechs were smart enough to figure out that they would remain in use for a long time. As long as they weren't totally blown to pieces, the living mechs could always count on the Larkinsons to take care of them and even upgrade their capabilities in order to keep them competitive.

The Valkyrie Prime's was different from theirs. Venerable Joshua had been piloting it for at least a year and it had grown a lot in the process. Not only did it benefit from being

used by a powerful expert pilot, it also happened to be paired with the one whose life domain was exceptionally suitable to accelerate a living mech's growth!

Ves suspected that the latter factor caused the Valkyrie Prime's growth and maturation to exceed that of any other prime mech by a significant margin. Venerable Joshua wasn't his favorite expert pilot for nothing!

"It's a pity that not all growth is good." He slowly shook his head.

He slowly stepped forward and placed his armored hand on the surface of the Valkyrie Prime's broken torso.

Though the contact wasn't direct, both his Unending Regalia and the exterior of the prime mech were made out of Unending alloy. The spiritual conductivity of this material was excellent, so the indirect contact allowed him to examine and feel the Valkyrie Prime's spiritual foundation to a much more intimate degree!

A sense of death and malaise suffused the prime mech.

"I see." Ves became enlightened. "You've seen and inflicted death so many times that you have inadvertently become sensitive to your own demise as well. That's... quite remarkable. I never knew something like that could happen."

This made it all the more harder to go through with his decision to break down the remains of the Valkyrie Prime and recycle its materials.

The prime mech performed above and beyond what Ves demanded out of it. Together with Venerable Joshua, the Valkyrie Prime truly saved the clan with its fantastic capabilities.

Yet that did not stop Ves from going through with his intention to take out of Unending alloy so that he could use the recovered materials to construct the base form of the Chimera Project.

The Larkinson Clan needed an expert mech. The performance increase was too great and Venerable Joshua also deserved to pilot a machine that better complimented his current strength.

The Valkyrie Prime must have been aware of all of these considerations. After all, Venerable Joshua had been entertaining these thoughts as well when he interfaced with this mech.

This direct exposure caused the prime mech to show no objection to its final fate.

"Thank you, Valkyrie Prime." Ves sincerely said as he leaned his head forward until it touched the metal exterior. "It's not right for you to suffer this fate when you have done

everything right, but that is the way it works around here. I need to reuse your Unending alloy so I have no other choice. I am glad you understand."

The Valkyrie Prime might be a hexer mech, but its lifelong partner had always been Venerable Joshua.

The prime mech knew what its expert pilot needed and wanted the best for it as well.

Even if that meant that the Valkyrie Prime needed to be replaced by a newer and better machine, it chose to support the course of action that was best for Venerable Joshua!

The more he looked at this situation, the more it seemed as if the Valkyrie Prime loved Venerable Joshua!

Of course, the love it exhibited towards its only pilot wasn't the kind of love that Ketis held towards her boyfriend.

Instead, it was a more sisterly or platonic love. Ves found it difficult to find the right description for the subtle affection that the Valkyrie Prime held towards Venerable Joshua.

"This... is the love that one family member holds towards another family member."

Just like how his own mother did not hesitate to sacrifice everything for her son, the Valkyrie Prime also showed its willingness to embrace its own death as long as it benefited Joshua!

Ves was speechless for a moment. The Larkinson Clan's embrace of kinship wasn't limited towards its clansmen. Even its mechs had learned how to love the Larkinsons!

"This sounds too weird..."

He knew that if he told this to others, they would just look at him as if he was mad.

What was next, mechs marrying humans?

How could that even be possible, and how would they even be able to reproduce?

"Well, modern human tech is able to solve many problems, so an issue like this might not be impossible to resolve."

If that didn't work, then maybe Ves could truly and design a biomech. It would be a lot easier for it to reproduce with a human!

"I bet a biomech designer has already pulled it off!" He guessed.

Chapter 3304: Recognizing Reality

Just as predicted, the expeditionary fleet safely exited the Smiling Samuel Star Sector without any further incident.

Though the Golden Skull Alliance eventually declined to accept an escort from the armed forces of the Empire of the Lost, the exiled humans did not miss the upheaval that took place across the border.

The Lost mobilized a lot of reservists and readied its mech armies and other military assets for anything that might happen in the coming period of turbulence!

The spreading war tension also affected the other states that lived next to the Vulcan Empire. If the dwarves ever decided to lash out at its neighboring humans, the latter were determined to defend their homelands!

Though many people didn't have a choice where they lived and where their hearts were rooted, even those who had the choice to emigrate to a different state still chose to remain loyal to their roots.

Now, these brave and patriotic citizens were answering the call of duty and taking up arms in preparation for whatever the dwarves did next.

It might be that this was just an overreaction and that the Vulcan Empire would eventually settle down again. That would have made these mass mobilization orders a huge waste of time and money.

However, the threat posed by the Vulcanites was so great that few leaders wished to take the chance that their precautions were unnecessary.

Slowly but surely, the drums of war began to beat in the Fermi Star Sector! If the Crown Uprising wasn't enough, now a dominant element within the Vulcan Empire was actively agitating to attack the humans!

No matter how foolish or ill-advised such a notion sounded, the fanatical believers in the true dwarven god were not known for their rationality. Even if declaring war against every tall folk in the star cluster was mad, the Vulcanites could still do a lot of damage with their large and well-equipped mech armies!

It was in this troubling climate that the culprits that sparked this tension returned to the Amswick System.

The Lost were already in the process of reinforcing the defenses of the strategic port system.

Military vessels belonging to different mech regiments poured into Amswick on a constant basis.

Multiple construction vessels were erecting defensive platforms and supply bases throughout the star system.

The inhabited planets all went on a war footing as the cities were being transformed from commercial and industrial centers into hardened fortresses that were supposed to become strong enough to withstand orbital bombardment!

A lot of foreign and neutral trading ships hurried to complete their business and leave this developing hotspot with great haste!

"Those crazy dwarves always talked about conquering the rest of the star cluster, but how was I supposed to know they're being serious? I'm sorry for breaching our contract, but I would rather lose my money than my life!"

The local economy underwent a huge upheaval as lots of traders changed their minds and pulled out of Amswick and the Empire of the Lost.

Fortunately, the government anticipated that this might happen one day. The administration offered plenty of support to its local businesses and also provided large incentives for traders to supply essential war goods such as raw materials, ammunition and mechs.

Where there was money, there was greed. The flow of trade no longer centered around consumer goods. Instead, luxuries such as organic food and toys made way for nutrient packs and spare parts.

"It's all your fault, by the way." Gloriana commented as she and her husband enjoyed a sober breakfast in their grand stateroom. "If the Lost ever do something to us, I know who to blame."

"Miaow."

"Meow."

Their two cats briefly lifted their heads above their food bowls to nod in agreement.

"Hey, how could I know the Vulcanites are mad enough to defy the MTA?! No one in the galaxy ever does that!" Ves defended himself.

"Hmph!"

"Besides, have you looked at the news media lately? The Lost are celebrating us, not blaming us! We're the first humans in a couple of decades who have managed to beat the Vulcanites. We've managed to break their spell of invincibility!"

Even though the Larkinson Clan showed a lot of impressive tricks that many powers wished to grasp, it was not worth the risk to force the issue.

Just as Minister Shederin predicted, the Golden Skull Alliance turned into heroes. The huge civilian population of the Lost had become fans. The local humans thought that the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers deserved a reward for giving the Vulcan Empire a black eye!

The foreign minister also went out of his way to warm the clan's relations with the Lost. Though Shederin still had to abide by his patriarch's desire to maintain distance, a friendship was not an alliance. The smooth operator managed to cultivate numerous new relations with individuals in high standing who have always obsessed about taking back the territories they lost in Smiling Samuel!

Obtaining the backing of the war lobby of the Empire of the Lost was a huge step forward! The only price the Golden Skull Alliance needed to pay was to provide a detailed and accurate accounting of the Battle of Fordilla Zentra. The Lost were highly interested in learning more about their potential future opponents, so they demanded a lot of information about the dwarven mechs and the tactics they employed.

The more information the expeditionary fleet provided, the more gratitude it received from the local humans.

Another guarantee of safety was the contracts the Golden Skull Alliance signed with a handful of large and reputable mercenary organizations.

Each of them were large, trans-cluster security companies that could easily dispatch at least half a mech regiment each. They all signed on to protect and escort their clients for up to half a year or until they reached a gate system.

"It doesn't matter whether the thousands of mercenary mechs are reluctant to fight any large private organizations or government forces." Minister Shederin informed Ves. "The presence of the mercenaries are meant to discourage fights from happening in the first place. The security companies they hail from are large, well-connected enterprises that enjoy powerful backing and maintain a lot of friendly ties to important institutions."

Ves nodded in understanding. "I've worked with security companies before, so I'm already aware of this dynamic. Do we have to sign so many expensive contracts at once, though? Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson has already been complaining to me about the financial hole you've dug by spending hundreds of billions of hex credits!"

The foreign minister remained unapologetic. "You wanted to prioritize safety over frugality, so we did as you instructed. The risk of betrayal or noncompliance is rather significant if we entrust our safety to just a single security company, but if we pull in half-a-dozen of them, the chance that all of these mercenary organizations are willing to collude against our best interests is virtually nil. I have carefully selected them to make sure that they are based in different regions and maintain different relationship networks. That also makes it more expensive to bring them over. Don't forget that you usually get what you paid for. I think a successful entrepreneur like you should understand this concept."

"You don't need to patronize me." Ves responded with a grim expression. "Besides, I'm not sure how good I am at business after hearing how many times our financial position keeps growing weaker."

Raymond became increasingly more concerned about all of the debt the clan was accruing. Certainly, the LMC was still as profitable as ever, but the lack of new commercial products and the lackluster sales of the Sanctuary Treatment Editions resulted in stalling revenue growth.

This was quite inconvenient as the Larkinson Clan kept spending more money every month!

Though all of these expenditures were necessary in order to start off his true grand expedition on a stronger footing, when Ves saw that the debt his clan owed to various creditors kept moving closer to the psychological barrier of 10 trillion hex credits, he began to get really concerned!

Ves was not without his options though. If the clan truly required a short-term cash infusion, he could always adapt one of his exclusive mech designs such as the Ferocious Piranha IB to the commercial mech market.

In fact, he was already planning to suspend his rule of not selling any of his second-class mechs once he reached the Red Ocean.

No matter what storm he ignited in the Yeina Star Cluster, Ves would already be hundreds of thousands of light-years away!

He could even turn his former stomping grounds into his experimental playground once he became assured that none of his mistakes would come back to haunt him in the Red Ocean.

Minister Shederin just happened to bring up their plans for the future.

"It would help my work immensely if you told us what you have in mind after our fleet has completed its repair and reorganization efforts." He said as he gazed at Ves right in the eye. "Whatever goal you intended to pursue in the Vulcan Empire is not attainable

anymore. The Vulcanites do not welcome us and the growing war tension has increased the danger factor of this region by an order of magnitude. Our strength is miniscule compared to the main players. There is no rationale for us to get caught up in their game any further. The most prudent course of action is to resume our journey to the beyonder gate and leave all of our troubles from this old galaxy behind."

"..."

This wasn't the first time someone advised Ves to forget about the Vulcan Empire and just move on with his life.

"I haven't made a decision yet." Ves slowly responded. "I can't give up my goal just like that. Not yet. Our fleet isn't going anywhere until the emergency repairs on the Graveyard have concluded, so I still have plenty of time to consider my options. I'll get back to you in a few weeks about this topic."

"You're leaving a lot of people hanging by remaining indecisive." The Purnesser warned. "Our clansmen and our allies are all left with uncertainty while you keep weighing your choices. At some point, their patience will run out. Many of us chose to follow you because they believe you can lead them to prosperity. Once they believe that you are about to do the opposite, then..."

Ves irritatingly gestured his hand. "You don't need to remind me. There are greater issues at stake here that are not convenient for me to explain. Let me just say that I will not choose to stay here any longer once I am certain that I have exhausted all of my options."

The two separated after a fruitless discussion. Ves refused to give up on his goal even though his prospects of attaining it had shrunk to a miniscule possibility.

He was aware that it wasn't logical for him to remain stuck at this juncture. Timpala Steel had to be an extremely rare substance for it to be valued so highly by the Mech Designer System, but he was pretty certain that there had to be other sources of this substance out there. Humanity definitely came in touch with it once for the System to refer to it with a clear human-sounding name.

Years had gone by without any progress on his Supply Missions. Ves could easily wait a couple of years or decades more. The materials the System demanded were too high-end for a Journeyman like him to get in touch with. He suspected he had to advance to Master before he could even begin to inquire about them in the open!

Ves crossed his arms. "Am I being too hasty for my own good? Maybe I should learn to give up for once and just wait for another opportunity. It's impossible that the Smiling Samuel Star Sector is the only place where I can find a chunk of Timpala Steel."

Human civilization was vast and it was about to expand even further. The Red Ocean concentrated so many powerful and well-connected pioneers together that he might be able to obtain what he sought through trading with their backers!

"Why should I go through all of this trouble to dig up treasure when I can just pay someone else to do the heavy lifting instead?"

This was how mech designers truly obtained what they wanted. Ves just thought it was a pity to abandon this opportunity to complete a Supply Mission early considering that the System went out of its way to set it up during his last Mastery experience.

Yet he couldn't deny the dangers were too great this time. The game had escalated to the point where individuals were no longer able to exert any influence anymore!

Only the major factions and power players of the surrounding states were strong enough to play the game going forward. While Ves had thought about working together with them, the risk of getting used only to be tossed away was too great. His previous experiences with politicians and official institutions had burned him too many times for him to put any trust in the likes of the Empire of the Lost!

Maybe it was best if he learned his lesson and acknowledged his current reality. He couldn't keep endangering others in order to satisfy his greed.

His thoughts briefly lingered on his unborn daughter. Just the thought about dragging her in the middle of another battle caused him to feel pained!

"I'm about to become a father soon. Perhaps... I need to learn to let go..." He whispered to himself.

Chapter 3305: Stalling

"The local news organizations keep requesting to interview you or any other member of our clan." Gavin dutifully reported during the daily briefing session. "They still want to know how our mechs are able to unleash giant energy attacks and why our expert mechs are much more difficult to kill than normal."

Ves leaned back on his desk chair and casually waved his hand.

"My answer to that hasn't changed, Benny. We're not talking and we're not answering any questions. They'll have to make do with the public footage of our battle."

His assistant looked concerned. "I highly advise you to reconsider, boss. By not saying anything, we are letting other parties define the narrative of the battle. Ugly rumors about breaking taboos, consorting with crown terrorists and other ridiculous stories keep spreading over the galactic net. Plenty of parties who harbor ulterior motives have taken action."

"It's all talk. No one will do anything to us, not with six mercenary fleets protecting us at the same time. I really don't care if we piss people off. We're only passing through the Fermi Star Cluster so we don't have to please anyone."

A lot of people wanted the power displayed by the Larkinson Clan, but Ves already thought about it. He worked with Shederin to come up with a plan that relied on two measures.

First, as long as the Larkinsons kept saying nothing, the stories would slowly die down. Once the expeditionary fleet definitively left the star cluster, it was likely that the repercussions of the Battle of Fordilla Zentra would be buried in the archives.

Human space was too big and technology offered endless possibilities. This was not the first time that someone came up with a trump card that was able to deal massive area damage.

The biggest difficulty in obtaining this power was to master the requisite high technology or alien technology. To that, Ves proposed a simple solution.

The Larkinson Clan simply published a statement that its expert mechs were designed in partnership with Master Moira Willix of the Mech Trade Association.

That pretty much shut any direct demands to sell, trade or share his battle formations.

Even though Master Willix had no involvement with battle formations, others didn't know that. By truthfully stating that Master Willix collaborated with Larkinson mech designers on developing expert mechs for private use, the clan essentially insinuated that Willix or the MTA was on its side!

The truth was a bit more complex, but as long as Master Willix didn't go out of her way to clarify her complex relationship with the Larkinson Patriarch, the public's imagination would surely go wild!

Though Ves felt rather mixed with the decision to use the MTA's reputation as a shield, he was willing to perpetuate any fiction as long as it worked!

"The emissaries from the Empire of the Lost also insist on meeting you in person. They wish to discuss ways to cooperate with each other."

"My answer to that is also the same." Ves frowned. "We don't cooperate with states and we have no intention of committing to anything in the Fermi Star Sector. We are simple travellers who only wish to complete our peaceful journey to the Red Ocean. If they really want to talk to someone, then they should get in line until they get their turn with Minister Shederin Purnesse. He's our only authorized spokesperson and they can answer all of their questions!"

Gavin twitched his mouth. "Minister Shederin... has been doing everything but answering questions lately. He's gained a reputation for being vague and intractable as of late."

"Good!" Ves grinned. "That means he's doing his job! He's not supposed to clarify anything. He's only there to buy time and stall all of those petty bureaucrats and representatives until we are ready to depart from this messy star cluster."

He would have become a lot more troubled by this issue in the past, but all of that had changed now that he had hired a slick and competent diplomat.

Minister Shederin could wear different coats as needed.

If the Larkinson Clan needed to forge a new partnership, then he could come across as friendly, sincere and persuasive.

If the Larkinson Clan needed to rebuff other people and organizations without offending them, then he could smile and keep saying empty words.

Whatever Ves wanted, Shederin or his capable and well-organized staff took care of it without needing the clan patriarch to take action in person.

Ves couldn't be more thankful for himself that he took the risk of bringing the Purnesse Family onboard.

"Do you have something that is actually new and interesting to report?" He impatiently asked.

"Well, there is one more issue." His personal assistant said. "Have you decided..."

"No."

"Uhm, okay."

Once Ves was done with dealing with these routine matters, he left his office and headed over to the personal workshop, moving much more freely than before now that he had gone back to wearing his uniform.

The alertness level within the Larkinson fleet had relaxed now that the clan had safely returned to the Amswick System. With almost a mech division's worth of mercenary mechs on guard, no one should entertain any ideas of messing with the Larkinsons.

The mood on the Spirit of Bentheim had also recovered. Though the vessel along with every capital ship had become a lot more crowded than before due to transferring so many people from the sub-capital ships, the clan administration had already done a lot of work in resettling them so they could get on with their lives.

Once he reached his personal workshop, he went through the mandatory security check before entering his personal workspace.

One of the more interesting spoils of war he obtained from the previous battle was the remains of several dwarven expert mechs.

A couple of them had already been transferred over the Graveyard in order to break them down and recycle any usable materials, but some merited further study before they contributed to the strategic material reserves of the Larkinson Clan.

The Paravad was the most valuable and interesting out of the dwarven expert mechs that the Larkinsons managed to salvage. It was a mid-tier expert mech that the Vulcanites expended a lot more time, effort and creativity to design than the more generic low-tier expert mechs.

Even though it was a dream for many mech designers to receive the opportunity to develop an expert mech, there weren't as many opportunities for them to express their creativity when they were limited by cramped budgets and limited availability of resonance materials.

This was why Ves and Gloriana quickly dismissed most of the wrecks such as the Morka Mark II or the two Slug Ranger expert mechs. Compared to the Larkinson expert mechs, the general expert mechs fielded by the Ferril Provincial Army didn't possess much depth!

"What a beautiful mech." Ves sincerely expressed his admiration.

The Paravad was a different expert mech from what he was accustomed to. Not only was it designed by dwarven mech designers who possessed distinctly different ideas on mech design, it was also an avian machine.

Due to his origin and background, Ves hadn't been exposed to many bestial mechs. His clan and many of the enemies it fought against usually employed humanoid mechs without a second thought, and that was not univerrally good.

It wasn't a big deal if Ves intended to remain in this region, but he and his clan were about to venture into the Red Ocean. The pioneers over there came from all corners of human space.

There were many star clusters in the galaxy where bestial mechs were much more popular than humanoid mechs. The people who utilized these types of mechs accumulated a lot of know-how and advantages when designing and fielding them. Anyone who was only accustomed to fighting against other humanoid mechs would surely suffer the consequences!

"In the last battle, our forces didn't fare so well against the bestial mechs of the Hivar Roarers." He admitted.

The Larkinsons needed to make up for this inadequacy as soon as possible. Ves wanted understand the properties of bestial mechs like the Paravad in order to satisfy his professional curiosity and to learn how to deal with them in future.

If possible, he didn't object to designing more bestial mechs himself, though the Larkinson Army didn't have any mech legions that were able to make use of them. Without any mech pilots who were trained in the use of bestial mechs, Ves didn't feel the need to branch out at the moment.

"Well, let's just see what further gains I can make."

Every expert mech was alive in some way. Even if other mech designers did a shoddy job and instilled this quality in them, the constant interaction between strong-willed expert pilots and their battle partners naturally generated an X-Factor.

Over time, this hint of life evolved into actual life that Ves was familiar with. The older the expert mech, the more remarkable they became!

"It's just like aging nutrient packs." Ves smiled.

He didn't even have to inspect the aging of the Paravad to know that Venerable Merek Bulfuron already piloted it for several years. According to the intelligence reports, the talented dwarven expert pilot received it as soon as he grew from a low-tier expert pilot to a mid-tier expert pilot.

This was generally considered to be an important watershed in the careers of military expert pilots. Once these talented individuals showed that they still had further growth potential, their superiors were much more willing to invest in their development.

Ves began to float above the deck in order to move closer to the exposed internals of the Paravad. Just as he was about to conduct a study on its novel internal architecture, he suddenly halted in place.

"That... wasn't there previously."

Several components were missing since the last time he inspected the dwarven expert mech. What was even worse was that there were many more parts that had shrunk in size. The small and distinctive bite marks immediately told him that Gloriana wasn't responsible for this unannounced tampering.

Ves narrowed his eyes and immediately noticed something. He moved up to the open cockpit and entered it only to find a familiar cat gnawing on the neural interface system!

"LUCKY!!!!"

"Meow!"

The gem cat jumped in the air but did not forget to finish chewing his bite.

"What is the meaning of this?!"

His cat arrogantly lifted his head and tail at Ves. He did not look guilty at all for using Paravad as his buffet.

"Meow meow meow."

"What do you mean, compensation!?" Ves responded with a disbelieving expression. "This goes way past that! I can look past your actions if you just took a bite here and there, but the Paravad is missing entire parts! You've devoured half the power reactor and pretty much every energy cell! Several tons worth of alloys and exotics have literally disappeared into your stomach!"

"Meow!" Lucky proudly rubbed his belly with one of his paws.

"You bastard!"

Before Ves could make his displeasure known, Lucky cheekily blinked before he quickly phased through the interior of the Paravad!

"Damn it!"

Ves briefly thought about dispatching Blinky to chase after Lucky, but his companion spirit was not a match against the gluttonous cat.

"Forget about it." Ves muttered.

Though the Paravad lost a lot of mass, there were still enough materials left to reinforce the Larkinson expert mechs. Ves and his wife just had to be a little more economical about using up the scarcer and more valuable exotics.

In order to prevent Lucky from enjoying another buffet, Ves decided against examining the Paravad any further and ordered his staff to transfer what was left of the avian expert mech to the Graveyard for processing.

"Maybe I should just hurry up and get on with completing the refits on my expert mechs."

To be honest, he had been taking his time on this matter. The longer it took to restore and upgrade his expert mechs, the more time he gained to make his choice.

"I really don't know what to do..."

Chapter 3306: Ship of Theseus

Though the work was rather tedious and time-consuming, Ves and the other Journeymen enjoyed restoring their expert mechs.

Not a lot of time had passed since the powerful machines had been built, so everyone involved in the repair and refit operation were still familiar with their designs.

This helped a lot with implementing targeted upgrades. Even so, the Journeymen made sure to limit the scope of their revisions to strengthening the internals. Any other changes demanded a lot more modeling and simulation testing in order to make sure that none of them detracted from the performance of the important expert mechs.

While Ketis spent most of her time on fixing up the First Sword, the rest allocated their time as evenly as possible.

The Riot was in a particularly poor shape, so Ves, Gloriana and Juliet spent a lot of hours slowly putting the expert mech back together.

They painstakingly designed a strengthened internal architecture that made express use of the high-quality exotics derived from salvaged dwarven expert mechs and slowly reconstructed Venerable Orfan's proud machine step by step.

Ves sometimes had the illusion that he was building an entirely new Riot. So much of the mech had to be reconstructed from scratch that it was hard to imagine that it was still the same expert mech that he had initially brought into this reality.

"Ever heard about the Ship of Theseus?" Gloriana asked as she petted Clixie while they took a break.

"Miaow~"

"No."

Lucky had been making himself scarce ever since he got caught eating portions of the Paravad, so Ves decided to push Blinky out of his mind and use his companion spirit as a petting object instead.

Mrow!

"Stay put, Blinky!"

Mrow mrow!

"The Ship of Theseus is a classic thought experiment." His wife explained when she predictably learned that Ves never heard of it. "Imagine a small frigate called the Theseus that has been in use for an extended period of time. Her captain is an adventurer explorer who often flies through hazardous regions. With each completed journey, the Theseus returns to civilization and undergoes repairs. Her hull plating, her propulsion system, her life support system, her FTL drive and every other ship part and system gets replaced over time. Let's say that one century after she initially went into service, not a single original component of the initial frigate is left. Every single part down to the keel has been replaced over the course of her service. Is she still the original Theseus?"

That was indeed an interesting thought experiment to Ves. He understood why it became a classic.

Still, unlike many other people, Ves had a clear answer in his mind. He just needed to look at the current state of the Riot to provide an answer that completely matched how he perceived his own work.

"I think the identity of something is more of an abstract notion than a material quality." He began. "Think about the Shield of Samar. It initially started off as the first production copy of our old Aurora Titan design. Over the course of its service with Venerable Jannzi, we upgraded it four times by my counting. You don't get to evolve a third-class mech into a second-class prime mech without replacing all of the cheap and weak parts that worked fine in the Bright Republic but are wholly insufficient to keep up with the battles we tend to fight these days."

Gloriana looked thoughtful as she lifted Clixie up in order to rub her furry belly.

"Is the Shield of Samar truly the same mech to you, or are you just claiming that to fool Venerable Jannzi?"

Ves shook his head. "I don't joke around when it comes to matters like that. I'm a professional. In my judgement, the Shield of Samar is the exact same mech as before because its living element has always remained the same. I have witnessed it grow from just a regular mech to a formidable prime mech that feels more alive than any other machine. Only the Quint can give it a run for its money, but in terms of age and time progression the Shield of Samar is the undisputed champion. It is the oldest continuous mech in service in our fleet."

His wife looked quite impressed with his statement. "If the Shield of Samar is already this impressive, what will happen to it when it becomes ten years older? A hundred years older?"

"Even I can't imagine how strong it will become." Ves carefully answered. "One of the core principles of my design philosophies is that my living mechs all have an opportunity to grow and evolve into something greater than their initial state. It's the same for

humans like us. When we are born, we're so small and vulnerable. Give us a couple of decades, and we can become so powerful and capable that we can lead entire organizations!"

He smiled as he gazed at Gloriana's stomach. His first-born child was developing nicely and was growing spiritually stronger and firmer with each passing day. His future daughter's companion spirit was also developing vigorously.

"There has to be limits to growth." His wife countered. "Humans can't live forever. It's not a leap to assume that mechs can't last forever. Where there is growth, there is also decline."

"You're right. I don't deny the possibility that living mechs only have a limited amount of life potential before they reach their respective limits. None of my mechs are old enough to ever come close to that point, though. I think they can easily last for at least a century as long as they are constantly taken care of, not that this will happen often. It's a lot easier to replace older mechs with newer ones than to expend an exponentially greater effort to renew the same mech all of the time. Even I don't think it is realistic to give the same treatment that the Shield of Samar enjoys to every mech in the Larkinson Clan."

His wife looked surprised at that. "Don't you advocate for the use of sustainable mechs? You once told me that one of my ambitions is to change the way that owners and users treat their mechs. You wanted to move away from people replacing their old mechs and encourage them to stick with them year after year."

"I haven't changed my mind about that, but considering how mechs are used by many different people and organizations, this is not an economical choice for everyone. It costs a lot of money to constantly renew the same mech so that they can keep up with the pace of technological advancement. Every major leap in mech generation entails a thorough transformation in tech, materials and standards. It's a lot easier and cheaper for clients to just replace their lastgen stock with the latest models."

Ves never thought he could convince every single person to embrace his vision. This was also why he mainly set his sights on the premium segment of the mech market and up. Only those who were willing to invest in their mechs were the most suitable target audience for his products.

"If you truly intend to continue your investment in the Shield of Samar, I'd imagine that it will undergo so many physical transformations that it becomes increasingly harder to justify that it is still the same mech. Perhaps its personality and its character are the same, but its meaning to everyone else has become completely different. Is it still justifiable for it to be called by the same name in that case?"

This was a more ambiguous question, and one that Ves could not answer immediately. "I think it becomes a definition issue at that point. However, even if everyone else truly thinks of a century-old Shield of Samar in a different light, what do the opinions of others

matter? Its pilot and its closest partner will always regard it as the same mech, no matter whether it started off as an ordinary third-class mech or has reached the apex of what mechs can become!"

"If the Shield of Samar has become a god mech, then it has become a completely different existence." Gloriana quietly said as she slowly scratched Clixie's ears. "Gods and mortals exist on separate levels, you know. No matter who you used to be when you were still human, once you become a god, you embrace a different identity. Nobody knows who the Superior Mother was before she ascended to become a Supreme. Her mortal name has become dust and forgotten."

Ves snorted. "That's not true. Her name is Cynthia and she used to raise me for a couple of years before she decided to leave me behind without finishing the job."

Both Gloriana and Clixie stared silently at him after he said those words.

"Miaow."

The Ship of Theseus was an interesting thought experiment, but Ves and Gloriana still had a lot of work to do. They stopped talking about useless philosophy and turned their attention back to what really mattered.

After several weeks of diligent work, three of the four Larkinson expert mechs not only became as good as new again, but also acquired crucial internal defense upgrades!

Though the revisions were a bit too rushed and modest for Gloriana's tastes, Ves insisted on prioritizing efficiency.

"The Bulwark Project and the Chimera Project need our presence. Our design teams can't keep working on them without our guidance." He told his wife. "Venerable Joshua and Venerable Jannzi can't wait much longer. Let's strive to finish their expert mechs in two months."

Gloriana looked uncertain. "That is cutting it close..."

"It's doable, I think. The hundreds of assistant mech designers haven't been doing nothing all this time. They have performed more than enough prep work to accelerate our own design tasks. I'm quite eager to get back in the saddle and complete this design round!"

Now that the Dark Zephyr and the other Larkinson expert mechs had been fixed, it was time for Ves to make a decision about his future plans.

Enough time had passed for the rest of the Larkinson Clan and its allies to complete their own repairs.

Many ships that had incurred major damage but managed to limp back to the Amswick System had received hasty and improvised repairs. Given that many of them were dispensable, their owners did not insist on bringing them back in peak condition. It was fine as long as the vessels lasted long enough to reach the gate system.

Even a more critical starship like the Graveyard had to make do with jury-rigged repair work. The Larkinsons essentially prioritized haste by slapping makeshift plating onto the damaged hull sections. This caused the scrappy capital ship to look like an even messier patchwork vessel!

Still, according to all of the calculations, the interim solutions should hold, so Ves was willing to trust that the repairs were sufficient enough for the Graveyard to travel onwards.

"Even if something goes wrong and she gets lost in the higher dimensions, at least it won't affect me. I'll be staying safe and sound in the Spirit of Bentheim." Ves smirked.

Yet before he could think about resuming the expeditionary fleet's journey to the beyonder gate, he still had to take care of another matter.

He left the Spirit of Bentheim and shuttled over to the Blinding Banshee. The odd, thin capital ship always weirded him out. Her hull was so long and skinny that he was always afraid that it would snap in half one day.

When Ves stepped aboard the ship, Calabast and Arnold were already there to greet his arrival.

"You can spare the pleasantries, Calabast." He said as he briskly strode forward. "You know why I'm here. Bring me to brig."

"We have several brigs, Ves." The spymaster smirked. "It might not look like it, but my ship can hold tens of thousands of prisons. We can even convert her into a hotel if you don't mind the lack of space."

Ves gave her another measured look. This time, she no longer teased him and brought him straight towards his desired destination.

They entered a large but narrow brig compartment. Small and barren cells lined both sides of a narrow hallway.

When Ves walked up to one of the cells, he looked straight through the one-way energy screen to examine its current occupant.

A listless dwarven mech pilot sat on his cot while he was bored out of his skull. Almost a month had gone by without anything happening. The boredom and isolation had long worn out his personality.

Ves grinned at the sight.

There were hundreds more dwarven soldiers locked in the other cells on the Blinding Banshee! That was plenty for what he had in mind!

"Hehehe..."

Chapter 3307: High-Quality Stock

Ves grinned so darkly that Calabast and Arnold both looked disturbed.

The mutated beast shivered and used his eight legs to crawl behind Calabast's boots.

"Squeak!"

After the clan patriarch finished indulging in himself, he quickly regained his composure.

"How many prisoners?" He asked.

"We are currently holding 734 Ferril servicemen in our cells." Calabast answered. "We used to hold several hundred more, but when our stealth shuttles and disguised rescue parties retrieved them from their broken mechs and ships, their condition was poor and our medical personnel failed to save them. The good news is that the survivors have all pulled through. Even the most heavily-injured ones have returned to health after receiving intensive treatment from our Lifer doctors. I'm not sure whether it was worth the expense to go so far, though. These dwarves..."

Ves smirked. "Oh, it's worth it. I need them in their best condition. I don't have much use for half-dead dwarven prisoners. This is the first time that I have high-quality experimental test subjects at my disposal. These proud, ferocious, disciplined soldiers are far superior to the pirates and scum that I used to work with! The stronger they are, the better my test results!"

"You..."

He turned to the reluctant-looking woman by his side. "We've been cooperating for a long time, Calabast. I don't believe for a second that you don't know what I've been up to with my prisoners."

"Heh, you're no fun." Calabast shrugged as she dropped her reluctant act. "As a matter of fact, I do have a good idea what goes on when prisoners enter your experimental chambers but never seem to come back out. I suggest that you keep me in the loop from now on. You don't have a security and intelligence background so there are still gaps in the methods you use to prevent leakage of information."

Ves thought about it and didn't immediately reject it. The people who worked alongside him for years already knew he was unusual. Even if he did his best to hide his secrets, people like Calabast weren't stupid.

"Very well, then. You can accompany me this time and take care of security matters. What I'm about to do next is probably going to be so controversial and impactful that I really don't want anyone else to know my intentions."

After they established this agreement, Ves quickly returned to business. He moved over to another cell and spotted another listless dwarf.

"Tell me more about the prisoners."

"Of the 734 prisoners of the Ferril Provincial Army, 212 of them consist of mech pilots and 522 of them are ship personnel. The mix of ship personnel is fairly even but the majority of captured dwarven mech pilots hail from the Molten Hammer and Hivar Roarer mech divisions."

Ves nodded in understanding. During the post-battle rescue operation, he had secretly ordered the Black Cats to go out and smuggle as many dwarven prisoners as they could underneath the noses of the enemy fleet.

The Black Cat retrieval parties did not dare to travel too close to the intact enemy fleet. They could only scour the outskirts and the zones closer to the expeditionary fleet to fulfill their objectives.

If the Black Cats didn't need to hide, then they could have easily captured double or triple the amount of prisoners!

"Do the Ferrils know we have their men?"

Calabast gave him a sidelong glance. "If you're asking whether we will suffer any negative repercussions for capturing these prisoners, then no. My Black Cats have been discreet enough to avoid direct exposure. I can reasonably guess that the Ferril Provincial Army knows we took their men, but they shouldn't have any direct proof or they would have presented it already. After the end of the battle, the beaten dwarven mech divisions were too preoccupied with other matters to be on the lookout for anyone absconding with their own survivors. None of them expected that you would go after their own men."

The unspoken implication was that Ves must be crazy to capture enemy prisoners when there was no apparent meaning to doing so. It was too bad that he didn't care. He had greater priorities in mind and these precious dwarves would play an essential role in his next plan.

As Ves and Calabast continued to walk through the narrow corridor, Ves continued to peer through the one-way screens that kept the dwarves locked in isolation.

"Have you done what I've asked?"

She nodded. "We did. As soon as we took them into captivity, we began to pressure them in different ways. Aside from putting them in long-term isolation, we also stimulated them by limiting their food intake, varying the level of artificial gravity at random times, cutting off their light sources for days on end and broadcasting irritating noise in their cells. Although we have carefully controlled the intensity of these measures to avoid too many breakdowns, a number of dwarves failed to endure our trials. See here for example."

Calabast led Ves a few cells over. When they peered through the other side, they spotted a haggard-looking female dwarven mech pilot who was rocking on her cot like a bot whose programming had gone stuck.

"I want to go home..."

"I want to go home..."

"I want to go home..."

When Ves inspected the poor dwarven soldier with his other senses, he could sense the despair had broken what little spirit she possessed. It would take a disproportionate amount of effort to restore her sanity.

"A pity." Ves said with a touch of sadness. "She's not as valuable in this condition. Still, you can't make an omelet unless you break some eggs. Do you have dwarves who have managed to do well in resisting their treatment?"

"Of course. I'm actually impressed with these dwarven individuals. Their hatred and defiance has reached the level of elite soldiers. The Ferril Provincial Army has trained them well."

Calabast brought him to another cell. The burly dwarven soldier with a beard that stretched to his knees looked completely different from the previous prisoner.

Not only was he keeping himself in shape by performing pushups, his eyes constantly burned towards the one-way screen. It was as if he was ready to escape at a moment's notice as soon as the restrictive barrier went down!

Ves couldn't help but grin as he sensed the strong will and survival urge from this defiant Vulcanite serviceman!

"This fellow over here isn't anyone special." Calabast explained. "He's an ordinary security officer who specializes in demolitions. One of our team managed to capture him when he was trapped aboard a crippled combat carrier that had drifted away from the main battlefield. He didn't catch our attention at first, but as our treatment continued to put pressure on the prisoners, he was one of a small group of dwarves who did not surrender to our attempts to break them down."

Ves smiled. This was a truly valuable test subject!

"How many unbroken dwarven prisoners do we have?"

"Of the Ferril servicemen who have managed to endure all of our trials, only 34 mech pilots and 56 support personnel did not succumb to them. Their psychological states are still strong and it is unlikely that further deprivation will change that. These are the toughest dwarves that you can find."

"Good." Ves grinned. "I need to examine and categorize all 734 prisoners in person. The data that you have on them is quite complete but I need to make detailed observations in order to divide them into relevant groups."

"Very well. The prisoners aren't going anywhere so you can examine them at your leisure."

Ves spent several hours moving from cell to cell. He already opened up a new database file in his implant to register the properties of each individual dwarven prisoner.

The month in captivity had not been kind to them. None of the dwarves looked happy and comfortable after they endured the friendly 'hospitality' of the Black Cats.

However, there were still enough professional soldiers who relied on their heart and will to resist. These rare individuals were all gems as far as Ves was concerned. He eagerly studied them and paid special attention to their spiritualities.

After he completed his survey, Ves tallied his results.

It turned out that 17 of the 34 unbroken mech pilots possessed spiritual potential. Of the non-mech pilots, just 13 of 53 possessed spiritual potential.

Ves wasn't surprised by these results. Those with spiritual potential possessed advantages that others did not possess. It was easier for them to condense their will and cling on to their existing identities. Mech pilots were especially good at this because they always received the most training resources.

The defiance and strength exuded by these spiritually activated dwarves was impressive considering how little hope they received during their month of captivity. Ves

grew more and more excited when he thought about how he could make use of their strength.

He silently composed a list that classified the dwarven prisoners into different categories before transmitting the file to Calabast.

"I need a large and absolutely secure experimental chamber to conduct some experiments."

"The Blinding Banshee will definitely be able to fulfill your needs." Calabast answered with a smile. "How much space do you need?"

Ves thought about it for a moment. "I need enough space to hold the dwarven prisoners. I also need enough room to accommodate a mech with plenty of space if possible."

Calabast frowned. "The former is doable, but the latter is more challenging. The Blinding Banshee is not designed to carry mechs or other large objects. We will need to empty a cargo bay and increase its security level."

"Do that, then. In the meantime, I need your men to transport a number of high-value cargo from the Spirit of Bentheim to this ship to conduct my experiments."

"How long will this take?" Calabast frowned. "If you need several days to perform your activities, it will become harder to hide what you are doing."

"I don't intend to stay too long, so don't worry. According to my current experimental plans, I'll be done with the dwarves by the end of the day. Hopefully I can get back to the Spirit of Bentheim quickly enough to catch dinner with my wife."

Calabast suspected that she wouldn't have to worry about bringing the dwarven prisoners back to their cells. Their current accommodation would no longer become occupied once Ves was done with his experiments!

For a moment, she wanted to speak up and question what Ves was doing with the prisoners.

Then, she thought about all of the success that Ves had achieved in the span of a couple of years and decided to remain silent.

Power never came without a cost. Even if she harbored misgivings about her strategic partners conduct, she couldn't argue with the results.

From the moment she decided to hitch her wagon onto Ves, she already made a choice. It did not make sense to change her mind just because of her doubts. She had already gone too deep into the rabbit hole to go back.

"I will prepare the experimental environment according to your specifications and ready the prisoners with utmost discretion." Calabast promised to Ves. "I'll be making use of as many secure and vetted systems as possible to minimize the amount of clansmen who get involved. It may take some time because I need to take action myself in order to secure the cargo bay to the best of my ability."

"You do that, then. Make sure that there is as much separation between the prisoners and my experimental area. What I am about to do will probably affect a wide area so I don't want any of my test subjects getting exposed ahead of schedule."

Ves spent a few minutes passing on detailed instructions and specifications based on the schematic of one of the cargo bays of the Blinding Banshee.

Though the espionage ship was a lot more cramped than other capital ships, she was still a sizable vessel in her own right.

Soon enough, Ves was able to commence his first experiment for the day.

Chapter 3308: Repeat Experiment

Controlling the dwarven prisoners aboard the Blinding Banshee was easy.

There was no chance for them to pull off an escape when they had nothing but their bodies to resist their captivity, but just to be sure, they had all been fitted with mechanical limb locks.

These devices looked like dumbed-down versions of exoskeleton suits and they were deliberately made to be as modest and low tech as possible. After all, it was much easier to prevent improper tampering when the programming of the devices was simple!

Despite their lack of complexity, the mechanical limb locks were strong enough to force every dwarf to move their limbs according to whoever held the controls.

Dozens of cell barriers dropped at once. Though the captive dwarves briefly had the illusion that they were free for the first time in a month, their mechanical limb locks forced them to march out and move down a corridor without any deviation!

Their mouths were not restrained though, so plenty of them began to speak as they were being moved.

"...I... kill... me..."

"Thank you for answering my prayers, Vulcan!"

"Captain Akkora! You're alive! Wait, why are you here?"

"WE'RE FREE! WE'RE FREE! WE'RE FREE!"

"You fool! We're all going to die! The tall folk are cruel and vicious people. Did you think they would extend any mercy to dwarves like us? Not even Vulcan can save us anymore!"

None of the dwarves knew what was going on, but many of them already suspected that their departure from their cells might not be a good change.

Still, no matter what they thought or spoke, they could do nothing but march forward according to the instructions of the mechanical devices that had taken control over their limbs. Their resistance was futile and their pleas for help resulted in nothing!

Ves and Calabast watched on as the closed holding chambers were being filled with dwarf after dwarf. The mechanical limb locks precisely positioned them into evenly-spaced columns before keeping them in place.

The lack of clues and eerie actions unnerved a lot of prisoners. They sought comfort in their fellow dwarves as they finally had an opportunity to interact with other people. Many of them exhibited strong emotions as they cried, laughed, talked or remained patient for what was about to come.

"It's time." Ves said as he took a remote control device from Calabast. "No matter what happens, don't disturb me when I am conducting my experiments."

"I'll do my job while you do yours." The woman stated.

Though she still had a lot to say, she possessed enough self-control to keep her mouth shut. Ves kept his secrets close to his chest and would likely respond adversely if she insisted on getting to the bottom of his experiments.

It didn't matter. Ves trusted her enough to witness and guard over his experiments. Even if Calabast lacked the expertise to figure out what he was doing, she could still glean enough clues from what was about to happen.

Ves slowly moved down to the deck as he approached the experimental stage that he prepared. He stood behind a control station and began to inspect all of the settings before he was satisfied that every device was working as intended.

He briefly skimmed over the outline of his first experiment one last time in order to make sure he remembered every important detail. It was nothing special actually as he conducted similar experiments in the past.

The only actual difference was that his test subjects came from different stock!

"Now that I have a batch of tough and well-trained soldiers, let's see whether they will be able to succeed where their predecessors have failed." Ves grinned.

He manipulated the remote control and brought forward his first test subject. The fellow he chose to begin this session was the same defiant dwarven security officer who specialized in handling explosives!

When the mechanical limb lock forced him to march out of the waiting chamber and walk over to the experimental area, the dwarven captive glared at the only tall folk in sight. His shackles even began to rattle as he exerted as much strength as possible to resist his forced motions!

"It's you!" The dwarf angrily boomed! "You're the Tall Folk who dares blaspheme Vulcan! Let me out so that I can punch your face until your mother can't recognize anymore!"

Ves became more pleased at the spirit shown by his test subject. The feistier they became, the higher the chance of success!

To that end, he deliberately chose to expose his appearance to his captives so that they had a target to stimulate their emotions!

The anger and unwillingness radiating from the dwarven security officer tasted as sweet as wine to Ves.

In order to push his first test subject's buttons even more, he drew out a hammer that instantly attracted the dwarf's attention.

"That hammer... that hammer! LET GO OF THAT HAMMER! IT DOESN'T BELONG TO YOU! RETURN IT TO VULCAN OR RISK HIS WRATH!"

"Hehehe." Ves chuckled as he casually spun the hammer in his hand as if it was a toy. "This hammer is mine, little dwarf. Your imaginary god can't do anything to me and so can't you. If you truly want to rip this item from my grasp, then you need to become strong enough to break through your shackles! That will never happen, of course. Dwarves like you are stupid, pathetic brutes who only exist to slave away in mines."

That was one of the worst things to say to a Vulcanite!

"YOU BLASPHEMER! TALL FOLK LIKE YOU MUST DIE! GET ME OUT OF THESE LOCKS SO THAT I CAN @\$*&(@#&\$—"

Ves ignored the dwarf's outburst as he activated a command that commenced his first test.

The mechanical locks forced the dwarven prisoner to march forward until he crossed a clearly marked line.

A large vertical container was placed a short distance away. It was large enough to accommodate a mech but didn't seem special in any way.

Yet as soon as the dwarf was forced to come closer, a powerful external pressure immediately began to manipulate his emotions.

His insults abruptly cut off as many of his emotions became dampened. Even his anger at the tall folk dialed down a bit, though the dwarven prisoner did his best to resist this strange influence.

Only certain emotions escaped this effect. His desire to free himself and return to the Vulcan Empire became stronger, and so did his desire to gain strength!

"I need... to become... stronger! Ahhhh!"

The glow that affected the dwarf amplified these emotions and desires to such an extent that they quickly exerted a growing amount of pressure on his mind!

Meanwhile, Ves was over the moon when he tracked the performance of the dwarven prisoner.

"Yes, that's it. That's what I'm looking for. You're already lasting longer than my previous best test subject!"

The pirates and other prisoners that Ves had previously experimented on never lasted to this extent. He became fully confident that the quality of the individuals subjected to this experiment was a crucial variable to its success!

"Hahaha! I just knew I was on the right track this time! The stronger the test subject, the greater the likelihood that they will survive!"

The dwarven security officer finally couldn't endure the pressure any longer. His entire body exploded in a mist of red! If not for the energy screens containing the spread of expanding biomatter, the blood, flesh and other biomatter would have contaminated an even larger area!

Soon enough, a couple of cleaning bots flew over to clean up the mess with remarkable efficiency.

Despite this bloody outcome, Ves remained pleased as ever!

He already expected the dwarf to blow up. The individual wasn't particularly exceptional aside from his strong will so Ves chose for him to go first in order to obtain some initial results.

He had made some progress, at least! The dwarven soldier already lasted 23 seconds longer than the previous best performer. This was such a substantial improvement that Ves could smell he was close to a breakthrough!

"I still have plenty more defiant dwarves." Ves muttered as he tried his best to rein in his enthusiasm. Accomplishing this much progress was already good news but it was not the ultimate prize that he was trying to obtain.

He only has a limited amount of chances to achieve true success!

"Let's continue!"

Ves continued to use up his strong-willed test subjects without mercy. Bodies after bodies blew apart as the Aspect of Transcendence continued to test their mettle.

Each time the dwarves marched forth, Ves tried to prod them by insulting their people and showing off a hammer that looked as if it rightfully belonged to the dwarves!

It worked every time! The more religious and fanatical believers of the Dwarven God Cult were especially easy to provoke!

The only reason why he blocked the view to the Aspect of Transcendence was because he didn't want to break the minds of his test subjects. The Aspect of Transcendence looks so large and impressive that just looking at it might lead to unpredictable results.

A good researcher controlled the experimental environment as much as possible.

Dwarf after dwarf continued to march towards their moment of death or transcendence.

So far, only the former took place, but Ves did not lose hope. He had controlled order so that the norms among the defiant dwarves went first. They were comparably weaker and less promising than the other strong-willed dwarves so their chances of success were also the lowest.

Still, as the fatalities began to rise, he began to wince.

He had another experiment in mind where he had an excellent use of dwarves like these. Seeing their bodies explode over and over caused him to lament the increasing amount of losses he incurred.

Test subjects were also assets!

"Still, as long as one of them is able to pull through, I will be able to earn a huge profit!"

Ves was essentially gambling at this moment. If he lost all of his high-quality stock without any success, then his chances of meeting his target in his subsequent experiment would likely drop!

"C'mon... you can do it, dwarves."

In the end, he used up all of the defiant dwarven support personnel who did not possess any spiritual potential. Though each of them exhibited a lot of emotions, they failed to transform their lives.

"Well, I can't say I did not see this coming." Ves sighed.

He brought forward his next batch of test subjects.

These ones weren't mech pilots either, but they different from the last batch by possessing spiritual potential.

If they were mech designers or traditional swordsmen, they had an opportunity to break through to Journeyman or swordmaster. However, as far as he knew, none of these dwarves belonged to those known extraordinary professions.

Ves wasn't sure what to expect for that reason, but he was willing to see what happened.

"Let's go."

He only had 13 of these rare test subjects, so he paid a lot more attention to their mental states.

"Don't you want to kill me and take away this hammer?" Ves taunted at a prisoner. "Then do your best to grow strong enough! If not, I will trample upon your fellow Vulcanites and make sure to rob each and every one of them of their undeserved freedom!"

"YOU FILTHY TALL FOLK! I WILL KILL YOU IF IT'S THE LAST THING I DO!"

"Hehehe..."

After sufficiently stimulating the test subjects, Ves subjected them to the Aspect of Transcendence's tender mercies.

Initially, the outcome of these attempts was little different from before. The only noteworthy change was that the dwarves with spiritual potential lasted up to 30 seconds

longer on average. This was a massive jump that signified that the mental resilience and tolerance of the latest batch was much stronger!

A growing sense of anticipation built up as Ves continued to bring other dwarves forward.

Eventually, the sixth angry dwarven prisoner managed to keep his body together for 87 seconds, which was an unprecedented duration!

It was at this time that Ves sensed a spiritual explosion taking place in the dwarven individual's mind.

The test subject's spiritual potential was experiencing a miraculous growth!

"YES! He's breaking through! I knew this would happen! I finally have solid proof of my theory!"

A great moment had come to Ves! His experiment had finally succeeded!

Chapter 3309: A Brilliant Plan

Now that he had achieved his first successful result, Ves quickly moved to preserve his first success.

He quickly pressed a button that pulled the captive dwarf out of the danger zone.

The strong gravity force only pulled the captive's body far enough to prevent the Aspect of Transcendence from continuing to exert its influence on the test subject.

Ves did not want to take any risks. He needed his successful test subjects to remain alive.

Though he was curious to know what would happen if an evolving test subject continued to be exposed to the Aspect of Transcendence's strong glow, that was an experiment for another time.

Right now, he was more than happy that the dwarf succeeded where all of his other test subjects had failed!

The breakthrough event did not drag on for long. Ves continued to remain in rapture as he eagerly observed all of the changes that took place in the dwarven serviceman's mind.

Since the fellow wasn't a mech pilot, his will did not receive any exceptional empowerment. Instead, his previously inactive spiritual potential expanded in strength like a seed growing into a flower.

The metamorphosis was unlike anything he had seen before. Neither mech designers, mech pilots nor swordsmen evolved in this manner.

To be honest, Ves had no idea what he was looking at. Considering the dwarven captive used to serve as a warrant officer in charge of ammunition supplies aboard one of the derelict Ferril combat carriers, it was likely that the newly-evolved dwarf did not gain any special abilities.

Ves guessed that the boost the surviving test subject gained was probably general and unfocused. Perhaps he became a little smarter, a little faster and a little stronger. What little reality-defying properties he gained were unlikely to be exceptional either.

Still, the dwarf had taken his first step on the extraordinary road by becoming the equivalent of an expert candidate. If he broke through one more time, then just the strength of an expert pilot or Journeyman was enough to turn him into an exceptional individual!

"87 seconds!"

This was how long the dwarf lasted before his spiritual potential ignited into a stronger and more real form. Ves had a hunch that this was a critical number and one that every other test subject had to attain in order to pass the Aspect of Transcendence's trial!

Ves spent a few more minutes to check on the successful test subject's condition.

"His physical condition looks normal but his mental condition is a lot more active than before. Interesting."

In any other time, Ves would have dropped every other research project in order to study this dwarf's new properties. What had changed? What could he do? How had his personality shifted? Did he gain any new obsessions? What similarities did he share to other spiritual professions? Was he able to resist the Aspect of Transcendence's glow at his current stage?

"I don't have the time to seek these answers." Ves muttered as he shook his head.

He had different goals in mind today. Now that he confirmed a number of key hypotheses and assumptions, he could perform more targeted experiments at a later date.

"I can make more test subjects like these now that I know what to look for!" He grinned.

In order to test whether lasting 87 seconds in the presence of the Aspect of Transcendence was the key to a successful breakthrough, Ves quickly used up the remainder of the current category of test subjects.

Dwarf after dwarf screamed before their bodies blew up. Ves keenly paid attention to how well they endured the pressure. Those he thought were stronger managed to last longer than those with lower odds.

"None of them lasted all the way to 87 seconds." Ves disappointly observed.

The closest one came close. The female dwarf lasted all the way to 84.5 seconds while spending half her time insulting Ves before her body blew up like the rest of her colleagues.

It wasn't until the second-to-last dwarf of this batch had her turn that the previous record was broken yet again.

"88.2 seconds!"

The middle-aged female dwarf endured the pressure for a little longer before her spiritual potential ignited in a similar fashion as before!

A gravitic projector quickly pulled her body away from the Aspect of Transcendence, allowing her to complete her breakthrough without any further risk.

"I can finally make comparisons!"

By collecting data on the second success case and comparing it to the first one, Ves was able to derive a lot of clues through comparative analysis.

Still, he didn't spend too much time on these studies as his day was far from over.

In the end, out of the 13 non-pilot dwarven prisoners with spiritual potential, 2 of them broke through!

Although the survival rate was still abysmal, Ves was incredibly happy to achieve this result.

"A 15 percent success chance is much better than a 0 percent success chance!"

Though the two dwarves broke through at slightly different exposure times, Ves chalked it up to individual differences. The critical breakthrough point had to be around this range!

"None of the dwarves without spiritual potential lasted this long." Ves recalled. "They only managed to hold on for 40 seconds or even 60 seconds before they succumbed."

This was already a pretty good result compared to weaker-willed individuals. Much of the low-quality stock couldn't even hold themselves together for more than 20 seconds before their heads and bodies went poof!

"Now, let's see what the difference is between norms and mech pilots!"

He had to make some adjustments before he started with this phase of the session. A special cockpit was moved over which was meant to simulate the act of piloting a mech. It was distinctly designed to be as harmless as possible.

After all, Ves didn't want to become one of those cliché scientists who succeeded in creating a monster only to get killed by his own success!

"Alright, let's start!"

Just like before, he first went through the test subjects who did not possess spiritual potential.

Of the 17 test subjects of this category, none of them survived. Their survival time was a little better than their non-mech pilot counterparts on average.

"Now, let's proceed with the most promising category of test subjects."

Ves rubbed his palms before he began to subject the strong-willed dwarven mech pilots with spiritual potential to the Aspect of Transcendence!

These captive dwarves were the most promising talents of their mech divisions. In another reality, they might have gone on to become expert candidates or expert pilots in their lifetimes.

Now, their only fate was to devote their lives and spirits to provide more experimental data to Ves!

Whether they succeeded or failed, Ves would forever honor their contributions to science by making good use of their test data!

"All of you are heroes." Tears almost welled up in his eyes. "I will forever remember the great gift that you have given to me. This will become one of the greatest experiments of my life!"

It was too bad that the dwarves were unable to share his jubilation. Many of them were dead while the survivors had every reason to kill him with their bare hands!

From the moment he began to put the first dwarven mech pilots with spiritual potential in the simulation cockpit, he already had a feeling that he would experience something remarkable.

"78 seconds!"

"83 seconds!"

"86.3 seconds! Success!"

A little sooner than expected, the third test subject of this promising category succeeded in breaking through!

A strong outburst of will erupted from the simulation cockpit as it began to glow and resonate according to the force of will of the lucky new expert candidate!

"DIE, YOU FALSE PROPHET! THE VULCAN EMPIRE BELONGS TO THE DWARVES!"

An amused smile appeared on Ves' face. "Well, this test subject has spunk, alright."

It was too bad the new expert candidate was piloting a mech that didn't actually exist. His breakthrough was completely meaningless if he was not able to resonate with anything that could actually pose a threat against his captors.

Once the breakthrough event had passed, Ves unceremoniously forced the successful test subject out of the simulation cockpit and moved him over to another waiting room.

"Let's see how the remainder fares."

Several more breakthroughs took place in the next hour. Though there were plenty of failures, Ves was gratified to see that most of the test subjects of this batch lasted the longest on average!

Those who lasted shorter generally possessed poorer qualifications according to the data. They were mostly individuals who were older, possessed lower genetic aptitudes and performed worse during the Battle of Fordilla Zentra.

"Hmm. Makes sense."

In total, 6 out of 17 dwarven expert pilots with spiritual potential successfully advanced to expert candidate.

This was a remarkable result considering that none of them had broken through in actual battle!

"A 35 percent success rate is not bad! If the price of failure wasn't death, I feel tempted to immediately put my Larkinson mech pilots through the same test!"

These weren't ordinary test subjects, though. The ones that Ves had experimented on so far only consisted of the toughest and most strong-willed dwarven captives aboard the Blinding Banshee. There were hundreds more test subjects that he didn't even bother to bring out this time.

"They're too weak." He sighed. "I can only use them to make up the numbers in my follow-up experiment."

As he began to study the results he obtained so far, he was able to derive some reasonable conclusions.

Ves guessed that the main reason why the mech pilots held out longer was because they were especially trained to endure great stresses in battle. A military mech pilot always had to maintain control over themselves.

Mech pilots also possessed more innate pride and confidence. Their profession was celebrated and honored in the Age of Mechs. It shouldn't be a surprise that they refused to bow their head and succumb to adverse pressure!

"It's not enough, though."

The mental resilience of those with no spiritual potential was too weak compared to those that did possess potential. The difference was quite substantial as the pressure that people experienced from the Aspect of Transcendence was not constant and linear.

Instead, it built up over time the longer they become exposed to the organic statue's glow!

The difference in mental resilience from someone who lasted 80 seconds was much weaker than someone who lasted 7 seconds longer!

This suggested to Ves that it was not easy to bridge this gap at the upper levels.

"It's probably impossible for most people to become strong enough to last 87 seconds in their lifetimes. Their resistance needs to reach a level that is beyond baseline human levels." Ves frowned.

Of course, this only applied to artificially induced breakthroughs. Ves didn't think the conditions were so harsh for natural breakthroughs. Those were different circumstances that were much more normal.

Using the Aspect of Transcendence to induce a breakthrough was a shortcut, so there were bound to be complications.

Now that he used up his batch of strong-willed test subjects, Ves wrapped up this experiment and began to prepare for his next endeavor.

He approached a large table and inspected all of the ingredients he prepared for his next experimental procedure.

"One complete vial of high-grade life-prolonging serum. Check."

"1 Unstable Chaos Essence gem. Check."

"20 P-stones that Blinky has completely filled with my spiritual energy. Check."

"1 P-stone that contains a minor spiritual fragment the Quint. Check."

"1 P-stone that contains a minor spiritual fragment of the Amaranto. Check."

"1 P-stone that contains a moderate spiritual fragment of the Unending One. Check."

"1 P-stone that contains a shard of Lady Aisling Curver's design seed. Check."

Ves briefly directed his gaze towards the waiting rooms that held both the newly-advanced dwarven test subjects as well as the hundreds of ordinary dwarven captives.

"6 heavy gravity variant human expert candidates. Check."

"2 heavy gravity variant human undefined preliminary transcendents. Check."

"178 mundane heavy gravity variant human military mech pilots. Check."

"466 mundane heavy gravity variant human military servicemen. Check."

After confirming that all of his ingredients were present and in a usable state, he placed the final key object and catalyst on the table.

"Hammer of Brilliance. Check."

The reason why this totem played a key role in his next experiment was because he harbored an ambitious plan.

A devious grin appeared on Ves' face.

"Since you dwarves yearn for Vulcan so much, then let me give you what you want!"

He finally decided to make a design spirit based on Vulcan!

The God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship did not exist. Not really. As far as Ves was concerned, he only existed in the imagination of the Vulcanites.

Initially, Ves was fine in allowing the dwarves to stick to their false delusions. Everyone was entitled to their own beliefs as long as they didn't bother anyone else.

It was too bad that the Ferril Province decided to pick a fight with the Golden Skull Alliance!

Did the Vulcanites really think that Ves wasn't going to retaliate for all of the Larkinsons they had slain?

"1400 Larkinson mech pilots and 6000 other Larkinson servicemen have died at their hands!"

Ever since the Ferrils took away those lives, Ves had always entertained thoughts of taking revenge.

The difficulty was that the expeditionary fleet was no match against a dominant second-rate state. The Vulcan Empire was able to field so many mechs that the Larkinson Clan would only drown if Ves dared to wage war against the dwarves!

If he wanted to attack them and hit them where it hurt, he needed to undermine them in another fashion.

In the past few weeks, he regularly talked with Shederin and Calabast to learn how to harm the Vulcan Empire. Both of them told him that religion was a clear fault line in their state. The division between the traditional Vulcan Faith and the upstart Dwarven God Cult had only grown more tense after the latest controversy had erupted!

Once Ves learned about all of this, his active imagination came up with a brilliant plan to mess up the Vulcan Empire and provide him with a path for him to travel to the Paramount Province without getting attacked!

"I'm just going to make another design spirit! A Vulcan design spirit!"

That wasn't all, though. A regular design spirit wasn't good enough for his liking.

First, Ves had to make a choice whether he should turn Vulcan into a human or a dwarven incarnation.

He couldn't decide, to be honest.

That was why he came up with an unorthodox solution.

"I'll just turn him into both a human and a dwarven design spirit!"

Who said that design spirits needed to come in a single form? Couldn't they take on multiple forms or identities at the same time?

Trisk didn't even have a defined shape! Aside from being a bird, it could be both male or female, colorful or colorless and big or small.

This example proved that design spirits didn't need to adhere to a strict definition. They were bound by fewer limitations than corporeal existences!

However, as soon as Ves thought about creating a design spirit based around Vulcan, he recalled another goal.

"I always wanted to create a way for me to excel in craftsmanship."

Ever since Master Willix lectured him about the importance of craftsmanship to mech designers, Ves yearned to improve his ability to create masterworks and even higher-quality works!

Though he knew that steady accumulation was the name of the game, Ves wouldn't be Ves if he didn't think of a method to cheat the process.

When he thought about how he could gain an advance, he came up with an interesting thought.

"I've long been able to surpass my limitations by creating different spirits."

An excellent example was Blinky. Before he created his own companion spirit, he didn't have an easy way to generate more spiritual energy. He was always wary of expending his own spiritual energy because it took too long to replenish it without the Grand Dynamo.

Blinky's creation neatly solved this problem and expanded his own capabilities by a huge margin.

Now, he was faced with a different problem.

His success rate in creating new masterworks was too low. It was too difficult to produce a high-quality mech and he was way too dependent on luck and serendipity to succeed.

Though a Journeyman like him was already far ahead of his peers in terms of creating masterworks, Ves wasn't satisfied!

If he wanted to realize his design philosophy faster and increase his chances to become a Star Designer in a reasonable time frame, then he needed to go above and beyond in order to create his own success!

"I'll just make a design spirit that excels in craftsmanship! Not only that, I will become that design spirit!"

That was right. Ves wasn't willing to allow any entity to become the patron saint of excellent craftsmanship. That would mean that he would have to borrow someone else's power whenever he wanted to fabricate a high-quality mech.

He wanted to master this power for himself!

"In essence, I want to add craftsmanship to one of my domains!"

There was a problem, though. His Spirituality was already based around life and mechs on an equal basis. Ves did not want to alter this balance just so that he could add craftsmanship to the mix.

"Besides, I doubt it would work since my domain is already locked in a solid design seed." He muttered.

His solution? Create a design spirit that was a similar existence to that of Blinky! The Vulcan that he was about to create would exist both as a separate entity but also serve as an extension of himself!

To put it in simpler terms, Ves wanted to create a design spirit incarnation of himself!

"Hahahaha! It's brilliant! I'll be able to get the best of both worlds!"

He clearly took inspiration from his mother's attempts to turn the Superior Mother into her 'incarnation', whatever that meant.

Although Ves didn't have a clue about the mechanics of his mother's incarnation technique, that didn't stop him from going through with his plan.

"I'll just invent my own method of creating an incarnation. If my mother can pull it off, so can I!" He confidently exclaimed.

With all of these measures, Ves intended to kill three birds with one stone.

"First, I'll be able to improve my craftsmanship faster and allow me to invent new methods to consistently produce masterworks at a much more accelerated pace!"

"Second, I can use my design spirit to mess up the Vulcan Empire and make them pay for killing my clansmen!"

"Third, I'll become both a human mech designer and a design spirit at once. As a result, I can enjoy the advantages of both without giving up anything!"

Ves would truly be able to become the greatest mech designer if he succeeded in his next procedure!

He cackled at the thought of all of the power he would be able to command!

"This is going to be brilliant!"

Chapter 3310: Diversification Strategy

Ves wanted to become a design spirit.

He had been thinking about it for years, actually. From the time when design spirits like the Solemn Guardian and the Superior Mother began to show that they were not only able to affect reality through sheer power, but also displayed a capability to perform unique and useful spiritual abilities, Ves hungered to obtain the same advantages.

"Of course, it's not that simple to live as a spiritual life form."

The more he saw the galaxy, the more he came in touch with incorporeal life. If he set aside his artificially created spiritual products for a moment, each of them were remarkable existences who all managed to detach themselves from their mortal coils while still clinging on to their lives.

"What all of them have in common is their strong spirituality." Ves surmised. "A weak person's spirituality will eventually dissipate from the material realm and end up elsewhere. The only way to prevent this transit from happening is to become strong enough to resist this natural force!"

He theorized that this was the key factor that allowed previously living and mortal entities to retain their existences in the material realm after their greatest anchor, their physical bodies, had expired.

However, Ves also guessed that it cost quite a lot of effort to hang onto the material realm.

"It's like trying to stay alive while being dumped onto an ice planet without clothes or heating." He muttered. "If you don't do anything to warm yourself up, you'll die from hypothermia!"

There were several ways to stay warm.

A shivering individual could find a rare zone where it was warmer and contained a natural source of heat. The Nyxian Gap was a good example of that. The barrier between the imaginary and material realms were thinner there, allowing his mother to expend less effort to maintain her existence in reality.

"The flaw of this method is quite obvious. Anyone who becomes dependent on a fixed source of warmth won't be able to leave without freezing to death!"

A person could generate heat by devouring food. This was not a solution for everyone, but Ves knew of at least three entities that could sustain themselves in this fashion. His mother, the Unending One and Blinky could all grow and sustain themselves by

devouring the spiritual energy of other entities without worrying about the heterogeneity of spiritual attributes.

"In an ecosystem, predators can only exist when there is a sufficient amount of prey within reach. If there isn't enough food around, the predators will begin to starve and die in droves!"

Someone who was freezing to death could also rely on another way to warm their bodies. He or she could stay warm by sharing the body warmth of other creatures. Although it sounded like an absurd solution in this analogy, this was the principal way in which the dark gods such as the Blinding One or design spirits like the Illustrious One maintained their power and existence.

Anyone who learned about this method might mistake those spiritual entities as gods, but Ves didn't see it that way.

To him, this interaction could easily be explained without resorting to superstition and religious claptrap.

"It's just a normal process of deriving spiritual feedback from a lot of living people who are aligned to the spiritual entity in question. A single human might not be able to provide a lot of spiritual tribute, but when there are millions of them, the influx becomes quite formidable!"

Each method of 'staying warm' had its strengths and shortcomings, but Ves looked down on the last one the most. It was the simplest and most flawed method for a spiritual entity to stay alive.

For example, the Superior Mother had quickly catapulted to become the strongest design spirit in Ves' collection due to the worship of trillions of fanatical Hexers, but what would happen if those same people began to die in droves?

What would happen if the Friday Coalition won the Komodo War and forced the defeated Hexers to abandon their beliefs in the Superior Mother?

The once-mighty ancestral spirit would turn from a wealthy baroness into a begging granny on the streets!

"Well, it shouldn't be that bad for the Superior Mother." Ves estimated. "Even if the Hexadric Hegemony collapses, she can still rely on the diaspora to get her spiritual feedback."

The Penitent Sisters, the Glory Seekers, and many other Hexer groups had left the Hegemony as of late. This provided the Superior Mother a strong form of insurance.

Even if this didn't work out, Ves was not going to stand by and let Cynthia's incarnation wither to death!

"Still, the fact I need to worry about this problem at all is highly concerning."

Apparently, the Superior Mother did inherit Cynthia's ability to devour spiritual energy. The two existed as separate entities who possessed different personalities, domains and abilities.

Cynthia Larkinson possessed a primal, predatory life domain.

The Superior Mother embodied and personified the six phases of existences.

"Yet it's exactly because they're different that they complement each other so well!"

After her supposed death, Cynthia apparently lived on as a spiritual ghost who had a lot of difficulty sustaining her continued existence due to lack of suitable prey. It was only by feeding on her own child that she managed to regain enough strength.

This was why it was a brilliant idea to link Cynthia together with the Superior Mother! Even if this inseparable bond came about due to an accident on his part, Ves was still glad he managed to create a powerful incarnation for his mother.

The Superior Mother's ability to derive spiritual feedback from normal humans granted Cynthia an alternate way to sustain her spiritual existence without needing to rely on Ves or other rare spiritual entities.

Likewise, Cynthia was also capable of ensuring that her incarnation would never starve to death as long as she had enough surplus spiritual energy.

"It's unlikely that the Superior Mother will lose all of her influence, so my mother is the one that truly benefits from this relationship." Ves muttered.

Even so, this relationship was quite flawed in his eyes as there were scenarios where Cynthia might get burdened by the need to keep two spiritual existences alive!

If Ves wanted to accomplish something similar, then he would be a fool to retain this flaw!

Since he was planning to make a spiritual incarnation of himself, he tried his best to put his designer mentality to work.

Only a weak and unambitious creator would think about imitating natural phenomena and existing products.

A true designer always sought to surpass the competition!

"If the Superior Mother is version 1.0, then my own spiritual incarnation should become the equivalent of version 2.0!"

Ves did not want to joke around with his life and future prospects. There were many ways his experimentation could go wrong, but he was confident he could succeed in this ambitious endeavor!

By gaining the power of an improved design spirit without giving up his personality and identity as a human, Ves would be able to augment his mech design career by leveraging the advantages of spiritual incarnation that was centered around craftsmanship!

Ves insisted on setting a couple of terms when he came up with this bold plan.

"First, my identity as Ves Larkinson the human mech designer must always maintain primacy. I am Ves, not Vulcan."

He did not want to make the mistake of creating a replacement for himself. What if Vulcan slipped out of control and decided to devour his own human maker? Ves would only have himself to blame if he screwed up so badly!

Fortunately, he already had experience in this matter. Blinky was a successful implementation of a semi-independent spirit that was derived from Ves but always remained subordinate. With all of the precautions he set, there was no way that the spiritual cat would ever be able to take over!

"Second, Vulcan must be able to feed itself and sustain its existence through multiple means. It must never become vulnerable or beholden to a single source of feeding."

The Superior Mother was always tied to Hexers or those who adhered to her values, and that was a major restriction.

Ves sought to address its flaws when he designed his own incarnation.

Though Vulcan was supposed to be the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship, it did not have to be the patron saint of all three domains at once.

Ves didn't care about the dwarves, but they could form a convenient source of spiritual feedback if Vulcan failed to gain traction among humans. After all, the success of the Vulcan Faith and the explosive rise of the Vulcan Empire proved the allure of a false god that Ves had casually invented!

"Dwarves are too gullible compared to normal humans." He smirked.

There were so many different religions in human space that competition was harsh. The pushback received by religious movements such as hexism or the Ylvainan Faith taught Ves that reckless expansion of belief systems would inevitably provoke a war!

He would be a fool to create a new religion in order to compete for the 'belief' of other humans!

"Instead of diving in that muddy ocean, I'll just find a neglected lake instead."

No ruling power in the galaxy cared about the dwarves. Neither the Big Two, the first-rate superstates or anyone else who held sway had ever shown genuine concern about heavy gravity variant humans.

This made it a lot less riskier for Vulcan to claim their spiritual feedback!

"In fact, the Vulcan Empire is already a successful test case!" Ves realized. "Since the dwarves were allowed to worship Vulcan without any response from other churches, the danger is obviously a lot less serious!"

Though the population of dwarves in human space was miniscule compared to normal humans, they still amounted to a huge amount in absolute terms!

With this huge population base as a strong and stable source of spiritual feedback, the Vulcan that Ves intended to create was unlikely to starve to death!

"Of course, Vulcan's main source of spiritual feedback will always come from acting as a design spirit for my mechs."

This was a proven method of gathering spiritual feedback without entering the muddy waters of religion. As long as Ves designed a few mechs with Vulcan involved in some way, he would be able to provide him with many channels of sustenance that had nothing to do with dwarves.

This was his diversification strategy. By relying on multiple sources of spiritual energy, his incarnation would never be rendered helpless!

"Even if dwarves ever become extinct and if mechs are no longer in use, Vulcan can still keep himself alive by directly devouring other sources of spiritual energy!"

This was one of the few rare cases where Ves was willing to use a fragment of the Unending One as an ingredient.

The only other time he did that was when he created Blinky.

"Both of them are extensions of myself, so I will always be able to control what they do with the power to devour and digest heterogeneous spiritual energy."

He never thought about granting external spiritual entities this capability. It was too powerful and removed a limitation, making it more likely that his design spirits might go rogue one day!

The scariest scenario that he could think of was if a design spirit began to prey on other design spirits! That would be incredibly bad for Ves and it was something that he would never allow!

"The best way to remove a temptation is to deny the possibility of it happening in the first place." Ves muttered. "None of my design spirits have the power of the Unending One, and as far as I'm concerned it should stay this way."

They were all herbivores, essentially. There was plenty of fodder for them to eat and enjoy.

The spiritual incarnation that Ves had in mind was different. It was not a carnivore like Cynthia.

"Instead, Vulcan will become an omnivore, an adaptable design spirit that will never grow hungry!"

This was the basis of Vulcan's power! It not only ensured he would remain adaptable under vastly different circumstances, but also gave him the potential to surpass every other design spirit including the Superior Mother!

Ves grinned as he imagined how Vulcan would thrive in the future!

"I'm sorry, mom, but my incarnation will become better than yours! With Vulcan's help I'll eventually be able to surpass you in power!"

She would no longer be able to treat him like a kid once that happened! It would become his turn to dominate his mother!