

Chapter 361 Realm of the Imaginary

The work put his new capabilities to the test. If he hadn't pushed his Intelligence and Physics to the next level, Ves wouldn't dream about reverse engineering the alien crystals.

However, he long stepped out of the confines of what an Apprentice Mech Designer should be capable of. His leapfrogging into Senior-level Physics provided Ves with a rudimentary ability to play around with exotics.

Naturally, he wouldn't be able to match the capabilities of a seasoned Journeyman or newly-advanced Senior. The main reason why Ves maintained his confidence was because he could reference his detailed scanner readings as well as a live sample.

He carefully opened the box that held the corpse of the crystal builder he found in the crystal garden. As the supposed leader of the crystal garden, his cyborg corpse incorporated the highest quality of crystals. It varied only minutely with the composition of the crystal city, which in itself served as some sort of capital or refuge for the alien race.

Ves treated the undecayed remains with reverence and respect. "I can't imagine how many millions years it rested beneath that strange mass of plantmeat."

He tried to date the remains, but failed to do so. His lab equipment didn't come with this kind of capability. After all, why would a mech designer need to figure out the age of an alien artifact? He wasn't an exobiologist nor a treasure hunter.

All of the organic bits in the crystal-laden corpse had long decomposed into nothing, leaving only the resilient crystals that served as the body's armor and mechanisms.

Ves couldn't imagine what kind of powers these augmentations bestowed to the leader. He must have been a formidable alien when he was still alive.

He continually speculated on the alien leader's story as he studied the crystal remains. He didn't do so on a whim or because he was bored, but because he had a use for it later on. While he worked on deciphering and decomposing the exact nature of the alien crystals, he already branched out a part of his mind on the next phase of his design project.

Now that he set a vision for his rifleman mech, he was ready to proceed with the construction of the images that powered its X-Factor.

"It's been a long time since I last worked on the X-Factor."

His stint with the Whalers in the Glowing Planet campaign exposed him to a lot of mechs, but he didn't get to design or produce any new ones. He mostly spent his efforts on repairs and modifications. These situations didn't allow him to bestow any spirituality to the mechs he worked, except for maybe the Blackbeak he gifted to the Whalers.

"I wonder how my first production model is faring."

The potentially historic and priceless mech could have been saved up and sold for a massive fortune, but he gave it away without hesitation. It was a shame to part with such a valuable treasure, but Ves needed to prove his sincerity to the Whalers and couldn't bring out any other mech at the time.

He thought about asking Walter's Whalers to hand back the first production model, but didn't do so in the end. Now that the Whalers became one of the few small-scale gangs that earned a handsome reward for their efforts, they would soon grow in power and influence.

Ordinarily, such a small but obscenely wealthy gang wouldn't be capable of holding on to its assets. However, their previously-hidden relations with the Blood Claws scared away the vultures eyeing all of their wealth.

From the latest weekly reports sent by his subordinates, Ves remained apprised of the gang's current situation. It was no secret that they recruited a whole bunch of mech pilots and issued large amount of purchase orders for mechs as well.

Strangely enough, this time they set their sights higher. Instead of buying bargain bin mechs valued at 3-5 million mechs, they started buying more expensive mainstay mechs with an average value of 30 million credits.

Furthermore, they also ordered a handful of advanced mechs for their veteran pilots. They even placed a generous order for a handful of silver label Blackbeaks at the LMC. Ves sent back a message to prioritize the fabrication and delivery of the Blackbeaks to the Whalers.

At this point in time, the interests of the LMC and the Whalers intersected with each other. They both occupied a vital position on the sleepy planet of Cloudy Curtain.

Ves had even broken his rare isolation and initiated a call of Calsie through the isolated terminal to apprise himself of the latest news.

"Calsie, what are the Whalers up to right now?"

"They're doing a lot of things at once. The Whalers are continuously expanding their numbers. They're also upgrading their bases into highly defensive fortifications. I can tell that once they've finished their expansion, they'll start to swallow some of the neighboring rural star systems."

"That's an ambitious plan! They sure have a big appetite!"

In a time of war, the Whalers opted to spread their wings and expand their influence. It was a bold and risky action, but if they succeeded, they would no longer be putting all of their eggs in a single basket. If the Cloudy Curtain System fell, they still had a number of escape routes available to themselves.

"How is the rest of Cloudy Curtain faring under these changes?"

"Support for the Whalers have never been higher. The increased recruitments means that a lot of locals are joining up with the Whalers. Even if they aren't very good mech pilots, the Whalers have hired a large number of trainers to shore up their new recruits. Right now, they only have numbers on their side, but after a couple of years of training, their strength will enter a whole new level."

This meant that the Whalers would transition from a small and inconsequential rural collection of thugs into a true interstellar gang. Such a shift in scope brought a lot of prosperity to the Whalers, but only if they successfully pushed out their surrounding rivals.

Ves turned to another topic once he finished asking about the Whalers. "Has anything changed in the political landscape? I don't believe the farming consortiums are resigned to let the LMC and the Whalers take over their home planet."

"I'm afraid you're correct." Calsie regretfully sighed. "The farming consortiums along with the White Doves and the Greens have been collaborating quietly behind the scenes. It's hard to keep track of their movements when the LMC and the Whalers make so much noise. Once they sprung their plan, it's too late for the Pioneers to intervene."

That sounded serious. Ves began to frown. "What happened?"

"Our opposition pulled back their influence from Freslin and concentrated all of their strengths in Orinoco. Politically, they've abandoned Freslin to the mech fanatics and the supporters of the Pioneers in favor of turning Orinoco into their bulwark. It's become impossible for us to penetrate the capital."

Ves was taken aback at this news. With the onset of war and the increased prominence of mechs, he never imagined the ossified elites who long ruled over Cloudy Curtain like their own fief to stop the bleeding in this fashion.

The more he thought about it, the more he admired whoever came up with this plan. By relocating their headquarters, businesses and supporters to the capital city, they maintained an impregnable position that couldn't be assailed.

Their decision had split Cloudy Curtain in half.

"So right now, our influence is near absolute in Freslin, right?"

"That's correct, but that's not as valuable as holding the capital. They still control the spaceport. They can implement any number of rules or collect any number of fees for every shipment that comes in and out of Cloudy Curtain."

Ves scratched his chin in consternation. "It's unlikely they'll do so immediately. They'll face a backlash if they purposefully hinder the LMC."

"That's what the Pioneers think as well. They're keeping the White Doves and the Greens in check for now, but that's no guarantee for the future."

Calsie looked at Ves as if she hoped he would relent on his stance of maintaining his neutrality. The young law graduate had always made her allegiance to the business-friendly group very clear. Ves indeed continued to retain her for her connections. That didn't mean he was inclined to change his mind.

"Monitor the situation for now and inform me of any changes."

Ves cut off the conversation and threw the local situation from his mind. Right now, what happened on the surface had little bearing on his work in the labs.

His studies into the crystals had progressed to formulating different compositions of crystals. Using the machines in the lab, he produced more than a dozen attempts to reproduce the essence of the alien technology.

He didn't have any high-value exotics on hand, but the lab did come stocked with all manner of regular exotics in regular supply. All of his attempts so far resulted in outright failures. Every crystal he cultivated so far ended up as brittle as glass. If they possessed the strength to propagate a laser beam, then they only emitted enough energy to light a closet.

"Difficult! Difficult! Difficult!"

Ves did not expect to succeed in a single day, but he hoped to make an early breakthrough. The more time he wasted on trying to get this gimmick to work, the more he delayed to completion of his second original design.

He set a solid deadline for himself. If he couldn't produce a satisfactory result in two weeks, he would abandon any plans on implementing this gimmick in his design.

In the meantime, he continued to ponder on the construction of the images.

The Triple Division technique lay at the root of his current methodology in fostering the X-Factor in his designs. The strongest result he had ever achieved only scored into the C's. Ves had always strived for breaking through the invisible barrier that held him back from scoring a B.

Right now, his recent breakthroughs in spirituality showed him a light in the dark. It remained a possibility for now, but the idea in his mind presented a possible way to finally break through that persistent barrier.

"The Triple Division technique is a way to superimpose three distinct images into a single amalgamation that's stronger than the sum of its parts. Although it's not possible to stuff three material objects into one, the rules in the imaginary dimensions are much less strict."

The three images consisted of the base model, the totem animal and the human myth. Up until now, Ves treated the latter two as something completely

within his mind. He could invent any number of imaginary creatures or persons with the traits he desired.

However, their strengths remained largely in his mind.

He only deviated from his pattern when he used the Triple Division technique on the Blackbeak. For the human myth, he took inspiration from Jackknife Jake, the deceased captain of the Velton Myrmidons of Moira's Paradise.

The aquatic planet lively mech scene and intense underwater mech duels had a profound effect on Ves, and Jackknife Jake's tragic ending inspired Ves to incorporate the captain's dauntless courage into the Blackbeak's human myth.

Ves hadn't thought about it at the time, but now he realized he missed a precious opportunity to elevate the human myth.

"The realm of the imaginary is powered by thoughts and emotion. Something which only exists in my mind can only hold so much strength. What if I use an image that's shared by many, or carries the weight of history?"

Ves eyed the miniature husk of the crystal leader that had endured a countless number of years. How many aliens looked up to this leader? How much influence did this alien wield in his lifetime?

When Ves focused his sixth sense on the corpse, he could faintly sense a desolate flavor. The ancient alien corpse carried a unique strength that Ves hoped to borrow for his upcoming design.

What would a rifleman mech look like if it carried some of the spirit of a long-dead alien leader?

Chapter 362 Lady Amalia

At the opening of the Komodo Star Sector, a fair number of colonists descended upon the far-flung region. Barren as it may be, its official recognition as a star sector under the collective rule and protection of the CFA and MTA turned it from a lawless frontier into a safe tract of stars.

Right around the same time of the founding of the Bright Republic, another sovereign entity came into being. Founded by a wealthy individual with delusions of grandeur, the Vesia Kingdom came into being.

The two newly-founded states butted heads almost immediately. The Bentheim port system formed the main sticking point. While the Vesians already occupied two other port systems, the greed and ambition of the newly inaugurated Vesian King knew no bounds.

The fairly pacifistic Bright Republic had no choice but to stand their ground, or be engulfed by the Vesians over time. A third-rate state with control over three strategic port systems would certainly grow into a regional bully.

If the Republic possessed no port system at all, it would never be able to match the growth of their neighboring rival.

A war ensued almost immediately.

As the Komodo Star Sector had been opened fairly early in the Age of Mechs, the two states mostly fumbled around with the new technology. The ancestor of the Larkinsons took part in the war on behalf of the Republic as a mercenary and distinguished himself against the unending aggression of the Vesians.

Ever since then, the Vesians declared war and brazenly invaded the Bright Republic almost every single generation. As much as the Brighters wished to counterattack and deter the Vesians from lusting after their stars, they couldn't match their lifelong opponents in population and industrial capacity.

As the perennial underdogs of the conflict, the Bright Republic had no choice but to endure and take up a defensive posture.

Months into the war, the Vesians took full control over the nominal border between the Kingdom and the Republic. The aggressors only considered this takeover as an appetizer. The main course had yet to be served.

On the expansive command center of a majestic Vesian fleet carrier, an extravagant amount of bridge officers tirelessly worked to prepare their fleet led for the upcoming operation.

An officer clad in a dark brown uniform slowly hovered up to the floating circular platform that looked down on the command center. A young woman barely in her thirties sat upon an ornate throne-like chair with her back as straight as steel. Her brilliantly coiffed blond hair framed a charmingly delicate face, which unfortunately took on an iron-willed expression.

Her purple uniform stood out from the rest. In addition, a distinctive golden epaulet adorned her left shoulder. It depicted a hand holding aloft a notched sword with 5 blazing silver stars on top.

Anyone in the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom knew what this image represented.

The Kingdom adopted the hand with the notched sword as their national symbol. It represented the nobility of their polity, and only a fraction of the population earned the right to wear this symbol.

Those who carried the hand with the notched sword on their epaulet served in the Mech Legion. Practically every officer in the Mech Legion was invariably a noble.

With the five silver stars shining down on the hand with the notched sword, The lady in purple stood above the rest. The Vesian Kingdom adopted a condensed version of the standard human ranks of nobility. The number of stars reflected the rank, while their color hinted at their relation to the rank.

The lowest and only non-hereditary rank was knight. It only shone with a single star. Most often, those who earned the rank of knight distinguished themselves in battle. The rank of knight opened up a lot of avenues to these warriors. They were always addressed as Sirs.

The next rank was baron, and it was the first true rank of nobility. Not only was it hereditary, it also came attached with a fief. Their Houses often formed the backbone of the middle ranks of the Mech Legion. The rank of baron shone with two stars.

The rank after that was count. Anyone who inherited the rank of count was a true mover and shaker within the Kingdom. Many higher officers carried the rank of count, and they also had a say in how the Kingdom should be run. The rank of count shone with three illustrious stars.

Arguably the most powerful rank was duke. A small number of dukes and duchesses carved up the Vesia Kingdom into several dukedoms, over which their Houses ruled with near-absolute impunity. Even the Vesian royals only exerted a limited amount of influence in the core stars ruled by the dukes. This powerful rank shone with five blazing stars.

The second-to-last rank was the rank of prince. Only a member of the Vesian royal family carried this rank. They wielded a vast amount of power, but simultaneously held very little authority. The rank of prince shone with seven fiery stars.

As for the monarch who ruled over them all, only the king carried the right to bear the nine majestic suns. The symbol incomparably outshone the rest.

Besides the royal ranks, the symbols could further be distinguished from the color of the stars.

Those who carried stars in bronze only shared peripheral relations with the noble in question. These would often be members of branch families or those who had been adopted in the family of the noble.

Those with silver stars consisted of the direct descendants of the noble that ruled over their lineage. They possessed the right to inherit the title and properties of their parents.

Only the true holders of the rank carried golden stars. They ruled over their noble Houses with a tyrannical amount of power. Only they earned the right to be addressed by their ranks.

Besides knights, the other members of their House could only be addressed by Lord or Lady.

In that regard, the Vesia Kingdom hadn't deviated too much from the standard pattern of neo-feudalism in human space.

Currently, the woman possessed an immense amount of power. Her epaulet directly indicated that she stood a chance of inheriting the Imodris Dukedom. She carried as much authority as the Duchess of Imodris herself, who ruled over the dukedom with an iron fist.

The noble lady looked over the expansive projection engulfing the entire front portion of the command center. Hundreds of fleet carriers, combat carriers and transports awaited her command. The amount of power at her fingertips would intoxicate any individual, but the woman treated it as normal as breathing air.

Once the officer arrived at the throne, he thumped his chest with his fist. "Reporting, ma'am! Every regiment of the 3rd Imodris Legion has reported in. The fleet is ready to transition into FTL."

"Has the destination been set, Sir Jameson?"

The knight nodded submissively at the woman he had served since the start of her career in the Mech Legion. "The fleet will arrive at the uninhabited Coxer System in approximately seven days."

The woman frowned. "That is too slow. This is only the first of seven hops. The Duchess has commanded me to reach the Bentheim region within two months. The entire strategic deployment of the Imodris Mech Army rests on the timing of our operation."

"My apologies, Lady Amalia." Sir Jameson bent her head. "I shall convey your wishes to the admiral and exhort him to make more haste."

"That is good. I do not wish to hear any further excuses. Dismissed."

Half an hour went by as a handful of engineers across the fleet prepared their ships for a distant transition.

The further their destination, the riskier the hop, especially if they wanted to travel to a smaller star. If they failed to navigate the gravitic waves in the higher dimensions during FTL, they might get thrown off-course and emerge hundreds or even thousands of light-years away. Often times, they ended up in a completely random position in space as well.

Many wayward ships that encountered mishaps in FTL ended up several star sectors away. They lucked out compared to the rest, as over sixty percent of the ships that went off course would never be heard again.

People used to believe they disappeared somewhere else, until extensive investigation revealed that they'd been sucked into a major gravity well. That almost always meant they crashed into a sun or a black hole.

Thus, the coordinated jump into FTL had to be done with care and precision. The transports that carried the supplies and provisions of the fleet required extra attention in this regard. Their engineers poured every bit of energy into pushing the transports to keep up with the rest.

Once Lady Amalia received another notice that the fleet would arrive at their initial destination a little faster, she stood up from her throne.

Hidden recorders flared to life. The massive viewscreen in front of the command center switched to project the commanding officer of the 3rd Imodris Legion. Almost every single projector aboard every ship relayed the same event to the rest of the fleet.

"Citizens of Imodris. On this day, my mother the Duchess of Imodris has given me a command. Within six months, the pathetic Republic's precious Bentheim region must burn and quake! The 3rd Imodris Legion will be the vanguard of their doom! As the tip of the spear, we shall drive the Brighters to tears!"

"Imodris!"

Every serviceman of the 3rd Imodris Legion had stood up and held their fists to their chest. Whether they served as spacers or mech pilots, they respected Lady Amalia from the depths of their hearts. She carried the will of the Duchess of Imodris.

"Fight well, hold nothing back, and kill as many Brighters as you can. Their Republic is soft and ripe for the picking! We have devastated them time and time again, rendering them helpless and mewling for peace. Vesians! Shall we grant them mercy?"

"No!" The entire bridge thundered. The same word echoed throughout the rest of the fleet as the servicemen of the 3rd Imodris Legion collectively stood behind their leader.

"In the coming operation, we will transition deep into Republican space. I hope to see the 3rd Imodris Legion smash aside their feeble in-system defenses and stomp their precious industries to the ground! The perils of fighting behind enemy lines are great, but we are doing Imodris and the rest of the Kingdom an important service! Does the 3rd Imodris Legion lack any courage? No! Because we are fearless! We are dauntless! We are invincible!"

"Imodris! Imodris! Imodris!"

The entire legion became invigorated by her speech. Their hunger for glory and their duty to Imodris drove them to a state of hysteria. Every subject of the Kingdom had been brought up to hate the Bright Republic since birth.

The Kingdom's conflict with the Republic was deep seethed and irreconcilable. Conflicts of territory turned into an accumulation of grudges and a never-ending cycle of revenge. The Vesians would never rest until they ground the Republic beneath the heel of their boots.

"Imodris shies away from battle! The other dukedoms may be dragging their feet and continue to cautiously probe the Mech Corps, but Imodris is different! We shall take the bull by the horns and teach our enemies a lesson they won't forget! Once the history books speak of this war, it will be the 3rd Imodris Legion who will shine the brightest!"

"For the Third!"

"For Imodris!"

"For the Kingdom!"

Lady Amalia maintained her impassioned posture and kept on grinning before the recorders. She only dropped her performance once the transmission cut off. Once she returned to her throne, she seated herself in a languid manner and resumed her next calculations.

She turned back to Sir Jameson, who had been quietly standing by her side. "Major, what are the odds of success? Tell me the truth."

"Our analysts aren't optimistic about our current plans." Jameson minutely frowned. "Her Grace the Duchess of Imodris expects much from the Third. Too much, perhaps."

Lady Amalia smiled coyly. "That just indicates my mother's regard for me. It is true that we are about to enter head-long into the jaws of the decrepit beast that stands for the Republic, but this is a role that I volunteered for myself. If we succeed, the 3rd Imodris Legion shall be known throughout the Kingdom as the legion that has struck the first true blow."

The major nodded at her words, but refrained from voicing his misgivings. As a veteran of the previous war, Jameson knew that the Bright Republic wouldn't roll over for the Mech Legion without a fight.

Perhaps Lady Amalia knew that herself, but she desperately needed to distinguish herself on the battlefield. As the sixth-born of the Duchess of Imodriiss, the fight to inherit the dukedom was not in her favor. Her older siblings had decades ahead of her and built up a vast network of nobles.

No one in the noble circles favored the tragic Lady Amalia, who had been born too late.

She wanted to prove them all wrong.

Chapter 363 Solitude

Back in the underground labs of the newly-christened Mech Nursery, Ves continued to develop new iterations of crystals. He minutely adjusted their composition and patterns, gaining more data by the day.

Most of the time, the crystals turned out to be outright failures. Ves had never eliminated the odds of producing brittle and opaque pieces of crystal. Let alone being embedded into the chest of a mech, they wouldn't even qualify as laser pointers.

"Why is this so difficult?!"

A depressing week marked with constant failures had already gone by. Ves kept trying to discover suitable substitutes to the original composition of the alien crystals with unerring persistence, but even his upgraded Intelligence and Physics hadn't been able to guarantee a quick success.

The unending setbacks taught Ves that he underestimated the enormity of working around exotics. Properly speaking, Ves should have delegated this work to a team of specialists. Lately, he started to consider if it might be a good idea to get some people on board this project.

After weighing the pros and cons, he decided not to do so at this time. "The LMC hasn't grown to the point of justifying a dedicated research team."

Ves could easily hire a horde of average researchers who graduated from regular institutions like the Rittersberg University of Technology. However, average wouldn't cut it. His Senior-level Physics vastly outshone almost every other physicist in the Republic.

An accumulation of the highest mech-related physics knowledge over several decades was nothing to scoff at. Only other older mech designers or true talents in the field of physics could match his intellectual acumen.

"It's useless to take on a bunch of dummies when I can do everything better myself. If I have to form a dedicated research department, then I'll have to find a way to hire the best."

Only true talents and leaders in their fields entered his discernment. However, it was exactly because of their competitive that everyone else already valued them highly.

Major companies, institutes and governments had already hooked their claws in them even before they graduated. As long as any student revealed some talents, they'd be recruited on the spot and received extensive training from their organizations upon graduation.

These talents would quietly disappear from the public and henceforth dedicate their entire being for the organization that coddled them like precious treasures.

Ves wouldn't be able to hire anyone with actual skill from the job market for this reason. "I can't form a design team the conventional way."

The LMC had only just begun to transform into a medium mech manufacturer. It still fell behind a true medium manufacturer in many other ways, from

production capacity to research and development. In a way, it hadn't completely shaken off the trappings of a small mech manufacturer.

"Well, I still have one more week to go. I refuse to give up now that I've generated all of this data."

Each failure brought him closer to success. He continued to rule out the wrong directions, leaving only a handful of narrow paths which might bring him to his desired outcome as long as he didn't stumble upon a dead end.

In the meantime, Ves mentally tried to construct an elaborate set of images for his upcoming design.

This time, he planned to incorporate an alien into the 'human' myth. Actually calling this type of image the human myth was just an expedient way for Ves to describe its purpose.

"The base role sets the foundation while the totem animal strengthens the primal instincts. The so-called human myth is needed to insert higher thought into the gestalt that influences the X-Factor."

Ves was no exobiologist, but he believed the crystal builders had developed their own form of civilization. Their ruins provided no evidence that they acted like savages that acted solely on their baser instincts.

Thus, even if he knew almost nothing about the crystal builders, he still wished to draw upon the existence of the deceased crystal leader as an image.

In order to build up an accurate image and take advantage of the crystal leader's immense potential, Ves tried to commune with its remains, in a sense. He constantly attempted to prod and poke the crystal leader's crystalline corpse with his severely underdeveloped spirituality while he continued to work on forming new crystals.

He mainly relied on a set of assumptions to drive his current action. No human in the galaxy knew how spirituality worked, let alone Ves, but believed his original design would gain a lot of strength if he succeeded in roping in the spirit of the crystal builder.

"Whether it's the alien's actual spirit or merely an imprint that he left behind in the fabric of history is still a question."

What happened when someone died? Humanity developed all kinds of fanciful theories, and Ves developed his own idea. If someone's spirituality became detached from their bodies due to death or other reasons, Ves believed that he could reel it in and make use of it in his designs.

Ves tried hard not to refer to the spiritual remnants as souls, because it carried a lot of theological implications. Religions around the galaxy would go nuts if they heard a description of what he planned to do. In their perspective, what was attempting to do might be considered necromancy or an attempt to play god!

He had to stifle his chuckle. "It's not like I'm trying to resurrect the dead. If some spiritual remnants are floating around in the imaginary realms for eons, then I might as well repurpose them for something useful."

Spoken like a true rationalist. He did not consider his actions as desecrating the dead and felt absolutely no guilt about his actions. All that talk about reincarnation, purgatory, redemption had nothing to do with him. Well water didn't interfere with river water.

In general, citizens of non-religious states always held a bias against any form of religion. The Bright Republic valued rationality very highly, so it was the strongest adherent to this unspoken rule.

Ves never stopped giving up his attempt to trace the spiritual remnant of the crystal leader, although his hopes started to dim as a few more days went by.

In contrast, his constant experimentation with the crystals started to bear fruit. They stopped being easy to break and they became capable of projecting a significant amount of power.

"Looks like I finally grasped the right direction. Right now, I need to strengthen the formula."

He only created a nail-sized piece of crystal. This was barely large enough for a toy laser pistol.

A laser crystal suitable enough for a mech-sized rifle should at least be the size of a chair. As for the crystal that Ves planned to embed in the chest or head, it should be at least twice or thrice as large.

Whenever he attempted to synthesize anything larger, cracks and faults started to appear. Ves believed that he would eventually be able to minimize the incidence of faults as long as he became more proficient. Still, the process demanded the utmost of his capabilities and his extensive familiarity with the nature of the crystals.

No one else would be able to replicate his feats even if they got a hold of the blueprints. While Seniors and Masters should be able to crack the secret, they had better things to do than to pay attention to a trivial Apprentice Mech Designer.

At the very least, none of his direct competitors would be able to imitate his gimmick.

While it gratified him to achieve a significant amount of process in this area, his search to grasp the spiritual remnant still remained empty-handed.

Eventually, Ves stopped his lab work and took a break.

He entered a small kitchen area and pressed a button on the large automatic cooking machine. The advanced device recombined the stored nutrient packs into a close imitation of sausage and mash.

Ves grabbed his plate and set it down on a nearby table and begun to dig in.

A few minutes later, Lucky floated through the walls and brushed against Ves in a familiar greeting. When Ves attempted to scratch Lucky's face, the mischievous cat quickly turned intangible again.

"Meow!"

"Oh come on, little buddy. You can't avoid my touch forever!"

Lucky swirled around Ves in a playful gesture before landing atop the kitchen machine to rest. In the past few weeks, Lucky continued to break inside the highly secured storerooms that secured a precious stock of expensive exotics. Not a single security measure proved capable of hindering Lucky's thieving claws.

At the very least, the cat didn't abuse his powers too much. He only nibbled a few bites before he contently left the storerooms. Ves still had plenty of inventory left to continue his experimentation on the crystals.

As he ate his meal, he looked at his contented cat with a thoughtful expression. "How well can you control your intangible state, Lucky?"

"Meow." Lucky lazily shifted from tangibility and intangibility and back several times over, demonstrating a complete level of control over the strange phenomenon.

Ves looked down on his own hand and willed his mind to turn the limb intangible.

He failed.

"Damn it, why doesn't it work for me? Is my Spirituality Attribute not high enough?"

Ves experienced a lot of crazy things ever since he embarked on his career as a mech designer. He discovered the X-Factor, ate a strange heavenly

flower in Groening IV and met a ghost that looked and acted a lot like his mother on the Glowing Planet.

In his latest adventure, he even peeled back the veil on spirituality and unified a lot of related theories and assumptions. Nevertheless, spirituality remained a marginal buzzword so long he couldn't make use of this knowledge.

"I'm missing something important. Why can't I extend my reach into the imaginary dimensions? Why am I unable to turn my body intangible?"

Perhaps an individual could only specialize in a narrow application of spirituality.

For example, Ves excelled in creating images from nothing and imprinting them onto a design.

Lucky took to intangibility like a fish to water.

Elite mech pilots specialized in drawing out the hidden potential of exotics through resonance.

High-ranked mech designers fitted different configurations of exotics together and bestowed new strengths onto their designs as if they performed magic.

"Can someone only do one of these things at a time?"

Ves did not believe that was the case. Perhaps elite mech pilots were the ones who monopolized the ability to resonate with exotics, but every other ability should be within his fingertips.

If only he had some sort of guide in this endeavor. From the start of his exploration into spirituality, he worked completely by himself. He could trust no one else with his advancements.

He had no qualms in admitting his selfishness. If he discovered something good, would he share it with the rest of the galaxy like a good samaritan?

Nope.

He wanted to keep his secrets to himself and take advantage of everyone else's ignorance. Why shouldn't he profit from his own work? The rest of humanity fared well enough on its own, and besides, everyone withheld their own secrets.

"The MTA, the CFA, the first-rate superstates and the heretical organizations like the Five Scrolls Compact all hold their own secrets. If they aren't sharing anything, why would I?"

Therefore, as much as Ves wanted to bring in others to help him with his research, he persisted in charting his course alone.

Perhaps the only people he would make an exception for were his parents. "Father, where are you?"

Last he heard, his father still mixed with the dark mercenaries in the lawless region of the Nyxian Gap. Ves hoped his father kept his head down there. He had no doubt his father would be able to avoid his pursuers and eke out an existence among the endless asteroid fields of the Gap.

As for his mother, Ves tried hard not to think about her. He always believed she had died quietly in her bed when he was young, but recent events kept prompting him to reconsider his beliefs.

"Are you still alive?"

As much as he wanted to move on from his mother's death, Ves still couldn't get over his hopes.

Too bad Ves had left the ghost behind on the Glowing Planet. With the Hegemony and the Coalition fighting over the resource-rich planet, it shouldn't last very long. Once the planet broke into pieces, any hopes of meeting the ghost of his mother would fade away.

Just then, a slim, pale hand reached out from behind and placed a juicy apple in front of his empty plate.

"You shouldn't eat those foods assembled from nutrient packs all the time. It's not as healthy as organically grown food."

Ves yelped and jumped from his chair like a scalded cat. He threw aside the table with the plate and apple and rolled forward in panic. He fumbled inside his pockets until he retrieved the Amastendira.

He pointed the laser pistol straight at the floating white specter that had crept up behind him. "Mother!"

Chapter 364 Cynthia

"Mama! Papa!"

"Come here, Vessie boy!"

A cute, black-haired toddler waddled over to his parents, who looked down on their son with eager grins. Ryncol Larkinson, a mech pilot of the Mech Corps, and Cynthia Larkinson, a wedding photographer and graphical artist, waited until their boy stumbled out of their house with his little legs.

Cynthia picked the boy up and gave him a loving smooch. "Who do you love more? Mama or papa?"

Little Vessie gazed at his mother and father with a confused expression. He put his thumb in his mouth and sucked on it. "Hmmm... mommy! I love mommy the best!"

The two began to cuddle affectionately while their father Ryncol ruefully looked on. "But you love daddy too, right!"

"Daddy!"

The little boy, now a little bit older, felt warm all over as his mother tucked him into his bed. She kissed him more than a dozen times on the cheek, making him feel as if the scary night had faded away.

"Mommy?"

"Yes, honey?"

"I want a sister. Can you give me a sister?"

"Oh, Vessie." His mother kissed him yet again. "Just wait a couple of years. It's not time yet."

"Please hurry. All my other friends have sisters but I don't have any."

"I promise you, Ves. You will have lots of brothers and sisters to play with in the future."

His mother stroked his cheek and couldn't resist giving Ves another kiss. After making sure the little nightlight stayed on, she left his room, allowing the little boy to enter a blissful state of rest.

"Mommy! Look at what daddy got me!"

The little boy, having grown up a little bit more, scampered over the grass towards his mother. He held a toy rifleman mech in one hand which he showed with childish glee.

A slim dark-haired woman sat next to a tree under the murky clouds of Cloudy Curtain. Despite the grim-looking skies, the woman smiled as if nothing in the galaxy could ruin her day. She picked the little boy up and held him on her lap.

"Oh, what's this, Vessie?"

"It's the latest Oncalix Systems GTNVC-39BE! It even has the underbarrel grenade launcher attachment! Look at how cool it is!"

Cynthia indulgently stroked her son's head. "Vessie boy, your father has given you enough mechs for toys. Isn't it enough? How about a stuffed tiger?"

"Noooooooooooo! I want more! I never have enough mechs!"

The boy kept nagging his mother for more toy mechs. He wanted to play with the entire collection of Oncalix Systems. Ves only had their rifleman and skirmisher mech models. His friend Joey who lived down the streets in the suburbs of Freslin constantly bragged about owning all nine toy models.

"I'll promise you another toy if you've been good. If you make mommy happy, I'll buy you another toy next month!"

"Moooom! That's too long! The Oncalix Systems mechs will grow old by then!"

His mother sighed. She understood nothing about his son's fascination for mechs, yet she knew that every other boy was just the same.

"Get back, I've got a gun!"

Ves, now a full adult, pointed the resplendent-looking Amastendirra at the apparition that suddenly appeared behind him without warning.

It should have been impossible for anyone to sneak into his private workshop floor! Several meters of pure alloy walls engulfed the floor, which was several kilometers underground. State-of-the-art sensors monitored any disturbances in the soil around the exterior of the floor.

As long as anyone tried to penetrate the vicinity of the Mech Nursery, they would undoubtedly get caught!

At least, that was the intention. Yet he made a massive oversight! Ves had not considered defending against energy beings that could turn their entire bodies intangible!

The trivial manner in which Lucky passed through high-security walls and vaults with contemptuous ease should have triggered some warning bells in his head!

The ghost looked much more formidable this time. Last time, the energy being that pretended to be his mother had casually stolen the high-grade Rorach's Bone that should have been his reward. Thankfully, he excavated another sample of high-grade ore on his own, but he always wondered why his mother took it away.

Now he knew. The ghost obviously used up the Rorach's Bone to her own benefit. Her exterior shone with milky white radiance that closely matched Lucky's own appearance.

The resemblance was uncanny. Nothing except high-grade Rorach's Bone could have caused the two to look so similar.

His mother dismissed his pistol-brandishing form with a wave of her dainty hand. "Ves, put that toy away. You're no soldier. It's dangerous to play around with guns."

The way she commanded him to put away his weapon sounded extremely familiar to Ves. She used to adopt the same motherly tone of voice when Ves stayed up too late while playing with his miniature mechs.

Some instinct buried deep within his bones moved his body before his mind could process the request. His arm automatically lowered the pistol before he sobered up.

"Your tricks won't work on me!" An angry frown appeared on his face as he raised his pistol and aligned the barrel to his mother's figure. "Stay back! I'll really shoot you if you come close!"

The ghost tutted as she slowly hovered forward. The closer she neared, the more Ves felt pressured. An invisible cloying miasma surrounded his mother that brushed against his sixth sense.

Strangely enough, this time his mother didn't leech off his internal energy cycle. His mother seemed much more complete. Perhaps she had grown stronger to the point where she didn't have to rely on outside sustenance for the moment.

Ves did not let down his guard in any case. This deceptive energy being certainly had an agenda of some sorts. Her intentions would certainly be detrimental to him. His attitude remained harsh and he even dialed up the power of his laser pistol.

"Stop! Don't come any closer! Lucky, help me!"

"Meow?"

Lucky kept lounging on top of the kitchen machine. The abrupt presence of another intangible presence hadn't alarmed him in any way. He completely treated the ghost that wore his mother's face as family.

His mother smirked and held out a hand. An unknown piece of glowing mineral materialized in her palm. Once it became solid, she threw it towards the cat.

"Lucky, is that what Vessie named you? Be a dear and play outside. I need some time alone with my son."

"Meow!"

Lucky jumped up to catch the mineral in his jaws, having partially materialized his upper body to manage the feat. Once he secured his snack, he eagerly floated away, leaving Ves to fend off his mother without any backup.

Even though he expected the betrayal, he still looked disappointed. "This stupid cat."

"As I said, my dear, don't forget who gifted you these toys. You have no idea where he comes from. Only your father and I are aware of his origins."

"Stop it! Just stop it!" Ves couldn't take it any longer. "My mother is dead! You are just some wraith who somehow managed to escape from the Glowing Planet! I don't know how you got out, but don't think you can act with impunity in my presence! This time I can hit you back!"

His mother dropped her smirk. She closed her eyes in exasperation. "Vessie, while I am not happy that you've clung to mechs in your adulthood, at least you haven't become a soldier. I'm proud to see you grow up to become a successful man, but you should at least recognize that you have no business pointing a gun at your mother."

As she spoke, she slowly floated closer. She completely disregarded the threat of the Amastendira, as if she treated him like he was a five year old holding up a toy gun to her body.

Ves struggled against the competing impulses of his instincts, his fear and his rational mind. The ghost had crossed the halfway point by the time he resolved his internal contradictions.

No matter the truth, he couldn't allow the ghost to get close. Before he ascertained the threat, he should keep it well away from his vicinity.

"Stop! If you come closer, I'll really shoot. This is your last warning!"

Again, his mother didn't look deterred. She calmly floated closer as if she wanted to bait him into action.

After several seconds of second-guessing, Ves steeled his heart and pulled the trigger.

A bright and thick laser beam emerged from the Amastendira and pierced straight through his mother's intangible form. The beam continued to strike the wall behind and bore a hole straight through the thick layers of alloy, ceramics and composites.

Against the might of a fully-powered laser beam from the Amastendira, everything in its way devolved into non-existence. The beam carved out over five hundred meters of solid walls and bedrock before its energy ran out.

Such a mighty laser beam could have threatened a mech or carved open the belly of a transport ship.

Even more remarkable, the laser beam also carried a hint of spirituality. It was one of the mastercrafted pistol's most cherished features, and allowed the wielder to fend off all manner of energy beings that roamed the galaxy.

It should have annihilated his mother, or at least inflicted grievous wounds on her intangible form.

Instead, the instant before he pulled the trigger, a hole had already emerged in his mother's intangible form. It lined up exactly with the trajectory of the beam. Thus, his mother evaded damage entirely. The peripheral heat that bloomed around the laser beam posed no threat to intangible forms at all.

The hand that held the Amastendira started to shake. Ves had never expected the ghost to pull off this kind of move. Such an insane reaction speed akin to precognition wouldn't have been out of place if he faced an expert mech pilot, but this was his mother! When she was still alive, she was a photographer!

The quick reaction further reinforced the idea in his mind that he faced an impostor.

Ves attempted to pull the trigger again, but held off at the last second. His mother would likely react in the same manner. The first laser beam had already inflicted a large amount of collateral damage. The containment of his

private workshop floor had been breached, and it was extremely expensive and troublesome to fix all of the damage.

He instead walked back, trying to keep his distance from his mother. He started to circle in order to avoid cornering himself like last time. His mother followed suit, and they slowly spun around the kitchen area as if he was a giggling young boy running around in circles while his mother playfully chased after her son.

Naturally, Ves did not feel any amusement at the tense standoff. "Tell me why you're here! How did you escape the Glowing Planet?"

The woman shook her head. "The so-called Glowing Planet was never my home. I do have to thank the Republic, though. Without their intervention, I would have never get past the monsters that you've called the devourers."

Obviously, his mother took advantage of the vacuum that ensued when Gregarious Wrath met and killed off the devourers and devourer king.

"What does that have to do with your presence here? Why can't you bother some other schmuck?!"

"Because I only have a single son. You are my only child, and nothing will stop me from meeting you again."

Her mother spoke those words with such a sweet tone that Ves mentally admired her performance. She truly performed her role to perfection. Even Ves couldn't spot any flaws.

"I suppose you stowed away aboard one of the ships that evacuated from the Glowing Planet. An energy being like you can probably make yourself undetectable if you wanted to. Am I right?"

"Correct, but that is not the entire story. You see, you are sorely mistaken if you believe I am some indigenous life form from the Glowing Planet."

Ves widened his eyes.

"The Glowing Planet is merely an opportunity. I've always been there. Only now am I able to appear before you in this form."

Deceptive witch! Her words muddled up his judgement until he became completely confused whether he should treat the ghost as his enemy or his mother.

Chapter 365 Fragmen

Ves tried hard to keep his mind on track. No matter what her mother claimed to be, she still remained a potential threat. "You haven't answered my question! Why are you here!?"

The ghost definitely had a purpose in revealing her presence to him at this time. Indeed, his mother smirked and materialized a familiar object in her grasp.

"You've been bumbling around like an idiot with this toy for over a week. As your mother, it's my duty to set you back onto the right path."

"What?"

Ves recognized the object in her palm. It was the crystalline remains of the leader he found in the crystal gardens. Ever since he started on developing the gimmick for his upcoming design, he continually studied the intricacies of the corpse.

All the organic parts had decayed away, leaving only pure crystals behind. Ves discovered that the quality of the miniature crystals surpassed those that made up the ruins the alien race had left behind.

He even figured out some of the rudimentary principles of the crystal augmentations. The tiny corpse that could fit in the palm of his hands possessed a lot of powerful cybernetic prowess in its crystal circuits.

Last he remembered, he left the corpse behind in his lab equipment.

"I know what you intend to do." His mother continued as she waved around the crystal leader's corpse. "You are doing it wrong. Do you realize the enormity of pulling back a vestige of the past? How arrogant to believe you can take what you want."

Ves temporarily ignored his mother's identity and the fact that she held one of his precious artifacts. For more than a week, he attempted to connect with the remains and attempted to trace some sort of spiritual presence that had been left behind.

So far, he completely failed to grasp a single useful thing. Thus, despite facing a ghost, Ves couldn't help but grow curious.

"What do you suggest?"

"There are many ways of accomplishing your goals, but most of them will result in fruitless outcomes. You are too weak and ignorant to know what you are doing. There is only one method that is suitable for a human with your strength."

Ves practically stood on his toes. He eagerly wanted to hear his mother's solution. "What method is that?"

"You must beseech the individual from beyond the grave. Resonate with his life, and let it borrow from your strength. A price must be paid."

Resonate with a dead person's life?

She demonstrated the method in front of him. Her milky-white ghost-like form flickered as she concentrated on the object in her hand. "The sentient being who inhabited this corpse has left behind a lot of regrets. His race is dead. His legacy is gone. Too much time has passed. What remains is only traces of his former self. Yet it is exactly those traces that are the strongest and most

enduring parts. You only need to gather the most suitable one for your purposes."

Ves saw the light. He previously believed that the alien leader's spirituality might have drifted somewhere in some distant dimension. He hadn't realized that it might have been split up.

"How do I attract a portion of its spirituality?"

"As I said, you resonate with its desires. For example..." His mother looked down on the small but incredibly durable crystal corpse. "This individual is part of a long-dead race. What stands out for you?"

"Uhm, it's exquisite and small."

"Indeed, it's small. His entire race is small. You can fit an entire crowd of these aliens in your hands. Now ask yourself, how do their stature compare to the average sentient alien beings in the galaxy?"

"Leaving out the weirder forms of life like the silicate sandmen, they're really tiny. You can hardly find any smaller humanoid aliens out there."

"In the perspective of these aliens, the rest of the galaxy is a frightening place. It is filled with monstrous giants who can easily crush them beneath their feet if they will it so. Their bodies, their weapons and their ships are tens or hundreds times larger than those of this diminutive race."

Ves started to understand what the crystal leader felt. "The tragedy of the small."

"Indeed, the tragedy of the small! Their race held a lot of potential, but the scale in which they worked with has crippled their development as soon as they met other space-faring races."

Ves could easily imagine what others races thought of the tiny aliens. At first contact, those aliens with normal body sizes compared to humans must have treated the crystal builders with contempt.

"It is this alien's eternal regret that their race has been born so small. No matter which alien race they tried to engage, they were never taken seriously. It has even led to their eventual downfall."

"How did you know all of this?"

"Because the fragment that holds this regret has told me so."

Her other palm flickered and a tiny silvery flame hovered over it. Ves became shocked when he sensed his sixth sense pinging at the flame.

It was another form of life!

"Is that...?"

"Indeed, this is a fragment."

Ves worked so hard to summon something like this. A small part of his mind believed that it couldn't be done because it sounded so fantastical. Was there really life beyond death?

His mother thrust out her palm, which pushed the flame away from her. It gently drifted over to Ves, who tried to take hold of the flame.

He failed. The flickering flame pushed right past his hand and went through his body! If he couldn't stop it from traveling forward, it would certainly disappear into the earth!

"Use your gifts, Vessie. I know you can do it!"

Driven by panic, Ves hastily focused his mind on his free hand. He still held onto the Amastendira, but he threw all thoughts of shooting his mother to the

side. Compared to her foreboding presence, he eagerly wished to obtain her insights.

Ves eventually managed to halt the flame from submerging into the walls. It took a very special kind of focus to affect the silvery fragment. His mother had been right in that he needed to understand their perspective.

He didn't actually stop it with his hands. Instead, he reached out with his mind and tried to connect with it with a sympathetic viewpoint.

The fragment acted much like a bot who responded to only certain commands. With his mother's help, Ves finally cracked the secret.

"I understand. The fragment is a remnant of a sentient life, but it isn't actually capable of independent thought. The only way to influence it is if I send out thoughts that drive the fragment to action."

Just then, Ves resonated with the fragment by plainly showing it an image of a rifleman mech. His rich creativity painted a detailed scene which compared the mech to the scale of the crystal garden.

The mech practically towered over the collection of crystals like a monolithic giant loomed over a bunch of ants.

The sheer difference in size might have scared away the fragment, but Ves communicated a desire to implant the spiritual fragment into the mech.

In essence, he wanted to solve the fragment's lifelong regrets by granting it a body that towered over many other alien races. The sheer might at its fingertips would turn about its racial inferiority complex and give the fragment a taste of what it was like to own a towering body.

There was no question whether the flame would respond. It instantly turned docile and patiently hovered above his palm.

"Uh, what do I do with it?"

"You cherish it and feed it until you have constructed a mental lattice in which it can rest." His mother responded patiently with a smile as she toyed with the crystal leader's corpse. "The fragment looks frail, but as long as you give it hope, it will continue to persist until you need it. Do not worry about its health."

Indeed. Through his sixth sense, Ves could feel a strengthening conviction in the fragment. It wanted Ves to deliver his promise of integrating the fragment with a mech. So long as that remained a possibility, the fragment would do everything in its power to remain in the material dimensions.

His mother had pointed out the light in the dark. Now that she gave him a direction, Ves could figure out the rest on his own. His animosity towards the ghost had dropped to the point where he could tolerate her existence.

He still felt highly uncomfortable about her presence, though. An awkward silence ensued where Ves wasn't sure about holding his mother at bay with the Amastendirra.

Even this wondrous weapon came with limits. Against a foe who could easily manipulate her intangible body around a laser beam, the Amastendirra offered very little countermeasures.

Ves had studied the weapon for a time, so he knew it came with a wide-area light projector. Basically, the light projector mode turned the straight and narrow laser beam in a cone of light that spread out quickly.

Ordinarily, such a mode would quickly diffuse the energy to the point where it hardly inflicted any damage. However, with sufficient power, it would still be able to cook an armored man within a distance of up to ten meters.

Maybe he could still exorcise this ghost this way, yet the collateral damage would be huge. Without an armored suit of his own, the heat would affect his body as well.

Even then, he wouldn't be able to guarantee that his mother would pull off another trick. She seemed incredibly capable of avoiding a light projector.

His mother smirked at him, as if she guessed what was on his mind. "I must take my leave now. You are old enough to stand on your own, and you don't need your mother to tell you what to do."

"Mom!"

Before she left, she focused on the crystal leader's corpse. Slowly, her humanoid form flickered, as if it lost some stability. Her form behaved as if it reflected off a pond which rippled from a stone.

Then, something drastic happened.

Her intangible bone-white substance got pulled into the crystal leader's tiny corpse. It was as if some kind of hole sucked her inside!

The crystal leader's corpse continued to hover in the air despite no one holding it aloft. It started to shake a few times before the crystals that made up its limbs started to glow in white. Some of the cavities in the strange alien's head started to glow, as if all of its eyes had turned to life.

A sound emerged from the corpse. "Ah, that was harder than I thought. This body is more older than I anticipated."

The crystals embedded into the corpse started to reconfigure themselves into different orientations. The hunched posture of the tiny alien straightened up, and the body started to resemble a human female.

The cavities that dotted its entire head closed up. Instead, two symmetrical eyes opened up, adorning the faceless head with a touch of humanity.

Ves was taken aback. He stood there with his mouth wide open as his mother intricately molded the cyborg body to her tastes. Ves never knew such a thing

was possible! Had the corpse always contained this function, or was it something she forced with her own powers?

Whatever the case, it didn't change the fact that his mother had taken possession of a body! Even though she looked like a doll, Ves knew better than to underestimate its capabilities. The crystals possessed remarkable capabilities that could wreck havoc!

He was certain that his mother was up to no good!

After she finished her adjustment, she smiled again at Ves and turned intangible. Once she made sure she retained the capability to pass through walls, she turned to go.

"Wait! That artifact is mine! I still need it for my research!"

"I've seen your work. You are almost done with your research project. What's yours is mine, and what's mine is yours."

His mother disappeared before Ves could get another word out.

She stole his artifact! Ves could have continued to perform more research on the corpse and figure out more applications of the crystals! Now it was gone!

Chapter 366 New Developmen

The departure of the ghost that pretended to be his mother left Ves in a morose mood. His ambivalence towards her identity deepened with each subsequent meeting.

Even with his superhuman Intelligence, he still couldn't determine whether the ghost spoke the truth. She moved exactly like he remembered from his childhood, but her attitude had turned ten times worse. Even though she helped him out, she wrapped up her benevolence with thorns.

Her unilateral appropriation of the crystal leader's corpse particularly set back his future plans. Without a live sample to of crystals to study, Ves wouldn't be

able to delve into its secrets and progress his understanding of the alien technology. Even though he took plenty of scans, they only offered a finite amount of data.

"Scans won't be able to substitute for the real thing."

More disturbing than his mother's lack of sensitivity regarding the ownership of his property, she also showed competence in areas which she shouldn't know.

"It's like she's some sort of highly-trained soldier or mech pilot."

As far as Ves was aware of, his mother lived a completely normal life. Ves inherited a small portion of his artistic sense from her. In her spare time, she enthusiastically played with recorders and snapped a lot of images of their family. She made a small business out of recording some of the weddings in Freslin.

Even though a couple of recorder bots and some automated software could do the job, they would never be able to convey the emotional impact if a human stood at the helm. His mother truly stood out in that area.

"My mother spent her lifetime developing those skills. It's impossible for her to be good at fighting."

Ves came up with three different answers to this discrepancy. Either she gained a lot of new skills after her death, or she was never the person she pretended to be when she still lived.

As for the final answer, the ghost used to be someone else, but for some reason or another assumed his mother's identity.

"This is far too complicated."

He could speculate all day, but from the evidence at hand, he failed to make up his mind. If the ghost assumed any other identity, then he may have been able to look at this conundrum in an objective manner.

Yet when it came to his mother, his judgement became clouded with emotion. He was not a bot who could strictly look at a situation and spit out a yes or no. Bots had the luxury of ignoring everything that fell out of their consideration.

Ves enjoyed no such luxury.

"At least she didn't suck out the life of me this time."

He faintly sensed that she became more formidable each time she paid a visit to him. Previously, she seemed more primal and ephemeral, as if she was one step away from oblivion. Now, she behaved much like a living human being, as if she had truly been resurrected from the grave.

Obviously, the ghost constantly sought to strengthen herself. Otherwise she wouldn't go through the trouble of stealing his high-grade Rorach's Bone and his crystal artifact.

"Even if we're related, that's no reason for taking away my stuff!"

Sadly, the ghost was nowhere to be found. She came and went according to her own whims. Even if she hovered right next to him, as long as she exerted her utmost in hiding her presence, Ves wouldn't know he was being spied upon.

His glowering mood turned even gloomier at that realization. The only reason why he didn't panic was because his mother wouldn't expose his secrets to anyone else.

She was just like his father, who offended a dangerous trans-galactic secret society in order to deliver the Mech Designer System to him. "If she's truly my mother, she only wants the best for me."

He turned his attention to the fragment that hovered before him. Ves carefully treated the flickering silvery spirit with care. He slowly drew it from the mess hall and brought it back to the labs.

"Let's see what makes you tick."

Ves proceeded to subject the fragment to all manner of tests and scans. Unfortunately, most of the machines failed to make sense of the fragment. It was as if it didn't exist. Similar to Lucky in his intangible state, the fragment could only be seen, not touched. He could forget about trying to manipulate it with the help of any tools.

Even the Vulcaneye had to admit defeat in front of the fragment. While the multiscanner spat out a few more observations, it hardly told him anything he didn't know.

"In the end, a spiritual fragment only responds to spiritual stimuli."

He gently manipulated the fragment between his hands. He became more proficient in tugging it back and forth. He found that he didn't need to employ his full focus to direct the fragment. As long as Ves revealed a hint of emotion, the spiritual fragment eventually reacted.

It had to be the right set of emotions and thought in order to work, however. The fragment yearned to be big. So long as Ves intimated that he would put the fragment into a mech, the silvery flame became as docile as a pet.

Ves couldn't experiment too much with the fragment. As fascinating as its existence implied, he still had a lot of work to do. His research on finding a more economic composition of crystal was almost done. He only needed to solve the problem of producing larger crystals without flaws.

"Let's finish up the images."

He sat down and relaxed while keeping the fragment in his view. The Triple Division technique called for superimposing three different images, but they didn't need to be of equal strength.

Yet Ves had never worked with an existing spiritual fragment. Even though it looked like anyone could snuff it out with a pinch of his fingers, it held a surprising amount of spiritual power.

Over millions of years of drifting about in the imaginary realms, the fragment lost everything redundant, leaving only the purest thoughts and emotions.

Whenever Ves brushed his senses close to the fragment, he countered unyielding will. It lacked much of the context that he wanted to know. He knew nothing about the crystal leader's history. This made it difficult for him to construct a backstory around the fragment.

"Maybe it doesn't need anything more."

Anything he added to the spiritual fragment wouldn't stick. Its unyielding will worked against Ves whenever he wanted to alter its makeup. Unlike most of his other images, the fragment had already endured for eons.

He set the fragment aside and focused his mind on constructing the other two images. Ves already put a lot of thought to them, so he easily constructed the images in his mind.

The base model consisted of a fast and nimble rifleman mech. It possessed the same defining traits as the mech in his vision, although in a more idealized way. The rifleman mech took up a starring role no matter if it fought alongside other rifleman mechs or operated at the head of a squad.

Ves even added a little flamboyance to its performance. This would be a mech meant to be piloted by the skilled. It catered to mech pilots who demanded a high amount of mobility while simultaneously wanted enough armor to triumph against enemy marksmen.

"My mech has to be fast, accurate, enduring and tough."

That was a very tall order, but Ves possessed enough confidence that he could deliver the goods.

The base model required little else. Ves only strengthened its core traits as much as possible in order to put up a decent fight against the spiritual fragment. He also imagined its performance becoming better over time. Age didn't degrade its performance, but rather strengthened it to a higher level.

"Now for the totem animal."

The totem animal had to fit the archetype. He needed to construct a mythical animal that fought with speed and finesse.

Rather than scouring the galactic net over an existing example, Ves conjured up an animal from scratch.

After several weeks of thought, he came up with a skinny fire ape. Unlike most primate species which relied on their brute strength to fight, this animal relied on his supernatural ability to shoot out concentrated fire from its eyes.

The fire ape began as a small and weak member of its tribe. Its differences and lack of physical prowess quickly forced it out of its tribe. As a young ape, it survived in the jungle by itself. It barely kept itself fed.

All of that changed once it manifested its power of fire. Its eyes grew red and the fury it became capable of releasing constantly became more formidable.

With increased strength came increased food. The more it ate, the stronger it grew. This cycle fueled the fire ape's growth, enabling it to range into the depths of the forest and contend with the kings that ruled over the animal kingdom.

Up to the very end, the fire ape had become the sovereign of the forest. It commanded the allegiance of all the other apes, allowing its species to become the first species under heaven.

Even then, the fire ape looked up at the skies and dreamt of breaking through the barrier that constrained it to its world.

Just like the base image, Ves made sure to incorporate a growth element in their story. His second original design shared a lot of traits with the Blackbeak design. Ves intended both of them to be enduring and resilient. They would definitely last long enough for their X-Factor to experience a lot of growth.

He already looked forward to how his mechs performed a couple of years from now.

Ves spent a lot of time on the fire ape's back story because he wanted to bestow a lot of strength to the image. If the fire ape buckled too easily against the spiritual fragment, then there wasn't any point in employing the Triple Division technique.

"I'm going to have to come up with another technique soon."

His studies into the X-Factor had only scratched the surface. He came up with the Triple Division technique after recognizing that images could be superimposed together. A lot of time had passed between now and then. He gained a lot of new knowledge, from learning that the images and X-Factor could grow, to the true nature of spirituality, to realizing he might be able to incorporate other sources of spirituality.

To make full use of these new insights, Ves required a new way of working with images. He wanted them to be strong and useful. The biggest downside to the Triple Division technique was that mutual cannibalism among the images resulted in a lot of waste.

Even if the eventual victor consumed the essence of its defeated rivals, it was a stretch if they could repurpose all of their strengths.

"It's a way of turning three weak images into a stronger one."

However, what would be the result of using two weak images and one incredibly strong one? Ves guessed that the stronger image might outright reject or annihilate the weaker images without attempting to absorb their strong points.

That was not the outcome he wanted.

When Ves looked at the fragment, he sensed an impenetrable wall. This spiritual remnant brooked no intrusion.

He wondered whether he could soften it up before he performed the final phase of the Triple Division technique. If he left it like this, then the technique would certainly result in failure.

"This image spent too much time in limbo. It has gone through hell and back and survived where many other spiritual fragments have disappeared."

However, Ves called it a fragment because it was an incomplete portion of a whole. Despite its all-encompassing defenses, it longed to be reunited with its fellow fragments.

Ves figured out a loophole. "If I can fool this fragment into recognizing the other two images as one of its own, what will happen?"

This notion went beyond the confines of the Triple Division technique. While it wasn't an entirely new technique, it deserved to be distinguished from the standard method.

Still, all of his ideas might come to nothing if he failed to fool the spiritual fragment. His brows began to furrow as he tried to figure out how he could open up a chink in the fragment's armor.

Chapter 367 Consumed

Ves thought about the issue for a couple of minutes.

"If I constructed the base model and totem animal in a way that matches the spiritual fragment, then there's a good chance they'll merge."

The spiritual fragment didn't need any strengthening. Rather, it needed the traits that the other two images brought to the table. Otherwise, his X-Factor wouldn't be able to bring out a comprehensive enhancement.

While his idea sounded like it could work, it wouldn't help him out in his current situation. He already constructed the other two images and they shared little in common with the spiritual fragment that Ves wanted to employ as the human myth.

The key to the Triple Division technique was to put together three distinctly different images. If he made them too similar, then that would defeat the point of the technique.

"This won't be the first time I'll handle a spiritual fragment. I can't keep making compromises if I encounter a recalcitrant fragment."

He needed to find a different solution. When he turned his attention back to the spiritual fragment, he recalled its bot-like behavior.

Another idea sprung to mind. The fragment couldn't think for itself. After all, it was only a small portion of a formerly complete entity. What if he issued a more elaborate command? Would the fragment behave according to his will?

He needed to approach this in the right way. He didn't want the fragment to assimilate the other two images in a seamless fashion, and neither did he want the fragment to obliterate them either. Whatever the final product may look like, it had to be greater than the sum of its parts.

"It has to be akin to a complete form of life."

Every other product of his Triple Division technique resulted in living images. His recent ones also incorporated a growth element in order to make them more formidable as they experienced multiple battles.

Ves knew how to approach this problem.

He sent out a couple of mental directives to the fragment. He laid out some of the fragment's inadequacies, prompting it to strengthen its desire to become whole again.

"It's impossible for you to merge with the other fragments from the crystal leader that are left adrift."

He wanted the fragment to be a little less discerning in its demands. It didn't need to seek out its original companions. Ves could introduce it to two new friends.

Even though the fragment proved obstinate, Ves managed to lower its guard by experimenting and figuring out the right kind of logic that would pass muster.

"It's like a puzzle."

After several hours of continuous probing, Ves managed to soften the fragment up to the point where it would comply with his intentions.

This was the point where he put all of his conjectures to the test. Failure would set him back a lot, and in the worst case the spiritual fragment might sustain irreparable harm.

He coaxed the image to inhabit his mindspace. After a moment, the fragment got sucked inside his head.

Right now, Ves felt as if his brain became a little stuffy. His thoughts flowed a little bit less fluidly as the fragment occupied a significant portion of his mindscape.

He also sensed that the fragment didn't remain inert. It interacted with the errant thoughts floating in his mind and exerted an unknown influence on his mind. He imaged drastic changes to his thinking pattern if he let the fragment occupy his mind for an extended amount of time.

"Best get to it then. I can't let it stay like this for too long."

Ves proceeded to carefully introduce the other two images to the new presence. If the fragment appeared almost solid, the other images looked as if they would break like eggs if they smashed against its surface.

The disparity was too big.

The safest approach would be to encourage the spiritual fragment to assimilate the images. Yet he didn't do so because he thought it would lead to an imperfect merger.

"There needs to be some struggle. It can't blindly incorporate the good and bad parts of the other images."

Therefore, Ves conditioned the dimwitted fragment to treat the other images as supplements that could enhance its strength and make it become whole.

In order to exert some control over the process, Ves focused his concentration and gifted the other two images with a considerable portion of his mental power. They needed to last long enough for the fragment to consume them over time.

After a bit more encouragement, the spiritual fragment went to work. It flew towards the other two images and clashed against them. Although the base model and the totem animal were much weaker than the fragment, they had the advantage of independent thought.

As living images, they possessed enough self-awareness to understand their dire situation. If they didn't band together and push back against the

domineering spiritual image, they'd be swallowed whole and disappear from existence.

"Come on. Put up a fight!"

Ves continued to pump more mental power into the underdogs, yet it hardly availed them as the fragment's imposing strength overwhelmed their defenses with ease. The pushback only allowed the images to delay their foreordained deaths.

He became a little distracted by the gruesome massacre being carried out in his mind. He felt as if he corrupted an innocent child into becoming a mass murderer.

Worse, he offered his own children as its first victims. He did create the base model and totem animal out of his own imagination. As his creations, they deserved better than be fated to die.

"Cattle are born to the slaughter every day." He shook his head. "I can't be too soft-hearted about what's happening."

As long as he achieved his desired outcome, he wouldn't let any doubts get in the way.

Ves kept his full attention on the struggle for dominance. Both the base model and the totem animal fought to the bitter end. As for the spiritual fragment, it ceaselessly broke up the portions that it managed to dislodge from the other two images and incorporated into its own existence.

The sheer disparity in strength meant the spiritual fragment hadn't grown any stronger. Instead, the additions prompted the fragment to lend some of its strength and fill them with life.

The fragment transformed inside his mind. It ceaselessly filled up the portions it lacked and ballooned into an entity that looked more complete.

Naturally, the fragment didn't restore itself to what it looked like before it was whole. That was gone, and could never be recovered.

Instead, the newly incorporated additions contained the essence of the other two images. The spiritual amalgamation slowly shook off the identity of a fragment and grew into a newly birthed spiritual entity.

Success!

When the two sacrificial images finally disappeared into the belly of the spiritual entity, Ves finally beheld the results. After a few more minutes of transformation, the spiritual entity showed off its new form.

It looked like a crystal golem. The entity's physical appearance no longer looked like a flame. Now, it turned into an imaginary crystalline life form that clearly derived its form from the appearances of the other two images.

The humanoid crystal golem released a formless pressure onto his mind. It was no longer a naive bot-like remnant that could be fooled by a couple of thoughts from Ves. It possessed its own capacity to think and decide.

It looked around his mindscape and kept up a vigilant stance. Every other image unconsciously accepted his presence. This was not so for the crystal golem.

"Hey, I didn't fool you. I made you whole, and I'm about to fulfill my other promise to you in a couple of months."

Ves got the sense that the crystal golem's patience would quickly wear thin. He had to work fast and complete his second original design fairly soon before the crystal golem did something drastic within his mind.

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. The process had taken a lot out of him. He used up almost every portion of strength in his mind.

"I could use a break."

Ves decided to take a nap and let his mental strength recover while he slept. He left the labs and entered the bedroom area on the private workshop floor. Upon reaching his private bedroom, he came across a dozing Lucky.

"So there you are, you lazy backstabbing cat."

Lucky softly purred in his slumber. The gem cat didn't even had the decency to do his bathroom business in his litter box. Ves picked up the shiny blue gem the cat deposited on his bedsheets and inspected it with his System-augmented vision.

[Zhilvenas of Swiftness]

Increases acceleration by 8% when installed on a mech.

Lately, Lucky's waste products started to come in the form of junk exotic gems. Sometimes, they even shone. This gave the gems a lot of class. Besides looking pretty, their effects also started to become more noticeable. A boost of eight percent in any parameter could not be underestimated.

"This is one of the good ones." Ves smiled and put it inside a small bag where he collected a number of other gems. "At least you're good for something, Lucky."

The cat softly purred again. Ves shook his head and picked him up and shoved him a bit further down the bed to make room for his body. He laid down on his bed and went to sleep.

The next day, Ves went through his morning ritual and resumed his work. Even though he built up the crystal golem, he still had to finalize his work on the gimmick.

He entered the labs and looked at his half-finished project. Just as he tried to figure out how to scale up the crystals without introducing cracks or other flaws, the crystal golem in his mind started to stir.

"What's going on?"

The crystal golem started conveying thoughts to Ves. Initially, he failed to interpret the stream of thoughts sent in his direction. It was only when he looked at the crystals he attempted to synthesize that the thoughts started to make sense.

"Are you telling me... I'm doing it wrong?"

The crystal golem didn't actually convey a lot of data to Ves. What it did decide to tell him only amounted to a couple of key concepts that Ves had a lot of difficulty trying to understand. The crystal builders adopted a completely different perspective on their technology, and Ves had to employ his entire upgraded Intelligence in trying to parse the alien thoughts.

Still, the things he figured out proved to be very relevant to the situation at hand. "I get it now! So that's why the crystals break! I've got to treat it as if I'm cultivating them! They're like organic growths!"

Just this lesson along with some other interpreted insights saved him a lot of time. Ves immediately put his new notions to the test and synthesized a crystal the size of his head. He had to use another lab machine to do so, and he also used up several critical raw materials that he stored up.

"It worked!"

The crystal golem hadn't let him astray. While the new solutions didn't guarantee that Ves would be able to synthesize a full-sized crystal that could be embedded in the chest of his mech, it already proved sufficient to be integrated in a laser rifle.

Even if he encountered some problems trying to produce a larger crystal, Ves could figure out the rest on his own.

"Thanks, crystal golem!"

The image didn't respond. It had only been a remnant instinct for it to lend a hand to Ves.

Now that he achieved enough progress with regards to the crystals, Ves was ready to move on to the next phase of his design project.

"I'll have to spend some time drafting up my new mech. It helps that I'm mostly going to reuse my existing component licenses."

From the Trailblazer engine to the Veltrex armor system, Ves intended to recycle as much component licenses as possible. Naturally, he wouldn't be able to incorporate every single license, but the ones he already possessed provided a solid framework to work around.

"I've got to finish this quickly. I've already wasted too much time on other diversions."

Chapter 368 Shaping

The draft design took shape in a short amount of time. Even though this was the first time he put his conception of his second original mech into shape, he had always imagined its design beforehand.

In his rich imagination, Ves constantly tinkered with the design elements of his rifleman mech. Every available moment, such as when he fell to sleep or took a bath, his thoughts always flitted back to the design of his mech.

A mech designer never stopped designing mechs. Even without a design program, a mech designer would use his own imagination to define its shape.

Therefore, the design process right now actually consisted of constructing the second draft rather than the first. Ves had already pinned down most of the major design choices he thought about beforehand.

"My mech has to be fast, accurate, enduring and tough. In that order."

Juggling those priorities took a lot of finesse. Over the course of a single day, Ves drew up a three-dimensional wireframe model of what his intended design should look like. He only drew up the broad strokes of his design, but it already set a couple of factors in stone.

First, the new design looked nothing like the Blackbeak. Besides using the same type of armor system, engine and other components, the two designs had nothing in common.

"The Blackbeak's role is to attract attention. As a knight, it's inevitable that it's going to be put to use in attracting enemy firepower."

In contrast, a rifleman mech would never volunteer itself as a target dummy. Only stupid and desperate mech pilots would call out attention to their lightly armored mechs.

A rifleman mech armor carried at least half as less armor than a knight mech. It was not as if rifleman mechs couldn't pile up the armor if it wished to do so, but the costs outweighed the benefits.

One of the most important reasons why was that all of that armor impacted the accuracy and precision of a ranged mech. This problem became much worse with higher classes of mechs, because the exotics incorporated in armor plating often interfered with the precision of the limbs.

Either a mech can be light or precise, or heavy and strong.

Only heavy mechs circumvented this unspoken rule. They possessed enough space and weight for mech designers to separate the interference and implement all kinds of compensation systems.

"Heavy mechs are mostly designed and produced by states. I won't be able to get in touch with heavy mechs in a long time."

Right now, Ves had to play by the rules, so he adopted a slimmer medium mech form optimized for speed and accuracy. If he wanted to design a skirmisher mech, he would probably strengthen the arms to make it capable of fighting up close. However, a rifleman mech didn't need that much power, so he kept them fairly slim.

"It's not going to take too much strength to lift up a rifle. It's more important to make sure they're stable and precise."

The heavier the arms, the harder it became to ensure they operated precisely according to the will of the mech pilot. More mass meant more complications. Therefore, mech designers sought to cut them down to the absolute minimum, with perhaps a small allowance for armor plating.

This was why rifleman mechs made for very poor melee mechs. They wouldn't be able to wield heavier weapons such as swords and spears effectively, and they made for a pathetic sight if they had to resort to their backup knives.

This was why rifleman mechs needed mobility. An immobile mech was a sitting duck to any skirmisher, swordsman mech or knight that ran up to its face.

"As long as they can run away, they can maintain their combat effectiveness."

Modern mech combat centered around the strategic positioning of rifleman mechs. The goal of both forces would be to smash apart the rifleman mechs of their opponents. As long as one side lost its rifleman mechs, its fate would be sealed.

Ves spent more time than he thought trying to draft up a good pair of legs. Different from skirmisher mechs, they didn't need to excel in top speed. Rather, they needed to accelerate quickly and be able to halt a mech's forward momentum in an instant.

This took a fair bit of thought. Stronger legs required larger legs, but larger legs also added to weight, which in turn slowed down the mech again.

Fortunately, Ves already owned a number of high-quality component licenses, most of which he exchanged from the Clifford Society with merits. Those component licenses enabled him to make more generous tradeoffs, thereby allowing him to achieve a decent balance between speed and weight.

With a pair of fairly capable legs, the mech looked a bit unbalanced with the skinny pair of arms. Almost every medium rifleman mech looked this way, so Ves wasn't worried about the negative consequences.

The rest of the mech looked fairly slim as well. Compared to the Blackbeak, it possessed a much slimmer weight, as Ves had left out most of the excess armor. He only left a fair bit on the front torso, as rifleman mechs would often be employed against enemy rifleman mechs. Ves figured that the amount of armor he had already added should be sufficient to win an even firefight against a regular rifleman mech.

"The armor largely plays the role of a buffer. It gives the mech pilot another chance after he screws up. His mech isn't supposed to get hit in the first place."

His mech's high mobility ensured the rifleman mech wouldn't get hit nearly as often as the Blackbeak. Thus Ves didn't worry too much about the deficiency in armor.

The rest of his design followed the standard convention for rifleman mechs. Ves did not try to introduce any radical departures from the common standard for rifleman mechs. He needed a lot more skill and experience to attempt such a thing.

Ves decided to adhere to best practices in that regard. This prevented him from introducing potentially fatal flaws, but it also left out any major jumps in performance.

It was not that Ves rejected risk-taking, but he felt he wasn't ready to take that step. "I'll have to become a full-fledged Journeyman Mech Designer before I attempt such a thing."

While he designed his mech, he also continuously channeled his focus. Working with the crystal golem was a lot different than working with images he created from his own imagination.

While the crystal golem largely possessed simple thoughts due to its unusual method of birth, it possessed a much stronger mentality than anything that Ves had hosted in his mind. The crystal golem was alive, and keenly watched on as Ves drafted the mech that it would eventually inhabit.

Naturally, the crystal golem knew nothing about mechs, so it hadn't been able to offer any technical assistance besides the implementation of the crystals. Ves embedded a smaller one in the laser rifle design and a larger one in the chest.

The latter crystal was a bit special, because Ves wanted it to be charged through multiple ways. First, any energy weapon that struck the crystal or around it would have some of its energy siphoned by it. Achieving such a phenomenon wasn't easy, and Ves required a lot of help from the crystal golem to turn the idea into a feasible implementation.

Fortunately, the crystal golem might have forgotten much of its original life, but it still held a wealth of expertise concerning crystal technology. It even amazingly taught him some of its race's simplest circuits, which facilitated the process of energy siphoning.

"This is amazing!"

The torso crystal would certainly make a big impact when it would be unveiled. Perhaps initially the market would dismiss it as another overhyped gimmick that could never deliver on its promise. When the new design finally demonstrated its capabilities, those skeptics and naysayers would certainly be stunned.

Three days later, Ves finally finished his draft design. It incorporated most of what he wanted out of his second original design. The only thing he regretted was not being able to supply the rifleman mech with enough batteries. Its slimmed-down volume left a bit less space for batteries than he anticipated. Even if he utilized the same high-quality batteries as the Blackbeak, it still wouldn't last very long if it continuously shot its weapon.

"I've got no choice but to utilize a laser rifle design with external battery packs."

Laser rifleman mechs distinguished themselves from ballistic rifleman mechs by their ease of supply. Laser rifles utilized standardized formats of batteries. As long as a large force brought enough copies of a handful of battery formats, it would easily be able to supply a motly crew of rifleman mechs.

However, the use of an external battery pack came with a lot of hassle. Laser rifles that drew power directly from its wielder always provided more convenience to the mech pilot. It significantly reduced the supply burden and saved the mech pilot from fumbling around when they replaced a spent battery pack with a fresh one.

Naturally, relying on internal energy cells came with its own downsides, one of which was that the entire mech would be drained much faster. At least with external battery packs, the worst a mech pilot could do was run out of packs. As long as his mech still possessed enough energy, he could always retreat.

This was not so with a complete dependence on internal energy cells. The convenience was actually a double-edged sword. Even if Ves was willing to accept the price, he still couldn't get around to the fact that his energy cells wouldn't be able to supply his laser rifle for long.

He hadn't only been drafting his mech. He also spent at least half a day on his laser rifle. In fact, it didn't look too different from the Tainted Sun which he designed before. Much of the principles used in the design of the gamma laser rifle could also be applied to a regular laser rifle.

Ves made sure to spice up its design in order to obscure the fact that he derived it from a forbidden weapon. This wasn't very hard to do. Gamma lasers demanded an insane amount of integrity and safeguards in order to handle its extremely high output.

Once Ves stripped most of the redundant features, he ended up with something that looked nothing like it could be used for anything illegal.

"Well, I think some smart people might be able to spot some clues."

They could only hold their suspicions, though. At best, someone would suspect that Ves studied under a weapons developer or mech designer who previously worked with gamma laser rifles.

Such news might be able to land Ves in hot water, but he knew very well that no such teacher existed. Who would his skeptics point at as proof that Ves had crossed a taboo?

Therefore, Ves didn't take the threat too seriously.

"Besides, the crystal integrated in the rifle mechanism will certainly attract everyone's attention."

The crystal acted as a laser propagator that substituted for a whole host of internal components. This might sound like a convenience, but in fact it added significantly to its cost. It also made the rifle harder to produce.

That last point would prove to be a major demerit. External weapons such as rifles often wore out quickly. Their lack of armor also meant they easily sustained crippling damage.

This wasn't anything to be concerned about in normal cases, as outfits often brought a bunch of spare laser rifles. Rifleman mechs also often exchanged their native weapon models with other others. Some mech pilots even regarded it as natural as wearing a different set of clothes each day.

The reason why such a custom came about was because laser rifles ordinarily didn't cost a lot of credits. However, Ves would have a lot of trouble trying to get his customers to accept purchasing his more expensive laser rifle, given that it would cost at least twice as much as a normal rifle.

It was very much possible that his customers would only use the crystal laser rifle that came with his product at the start. When it inevitably broke down, they'll just grab the nearest generic laser rifle instead of purchasing a branded one from the LMC.

"If I want to make my customers stick to my brand of weapons, I'll have to add more benefits to using them in conjunction with my mech."

This wasn't an old problem. Plenty of mech designers faced the same issue, and they developed a set of standard solutions to make the pairing between mech and weapon more attractive.

At the draft stage, it wasn't necessary for Ves to work on that aspect. He decided to leave the issue for later while he finalized the draft and made sure he hadn't missed any major design choices.

He nodded in satisfaction. "This is enough to give others a good impression of my mech. Let's see what others have to say about my work."

Chapter 369: Leaving the Cave

Before he ended his isolation, Ves quickly checked the System. In the last couple of weeks, his DP had crawled up. He noted with satisfaction that ever since the Mech Nursery got their hands on the two Benson production lines, his DP started to accumulate a lot faster.

"Still, it's going to take some time before I can get accumulate a decent reserve."

In order to design a competitive machine that could hold its own in the overcrowded market for rifleman mechs, Ves relied on a number of advantages.

Compared to a regular mech designer from the Bright Republic, Ves enjoyed a decisive superiority in knowledge and ability. His extensive collection of Skills and his enhanced Intelligence far outpaced a regular Apprentice Mech Designer.

His Physics Skill alone enabled him to apply the alien crystal technology to his laser weapon, which was a massive boost.

His extensive library of quality component licenses also enabled him to lift the quality of his design by several increments. Ves could never stop praising the quality of the Trailblazer engine. Oleg's casual work might look nothing special in the Friday Coalition, but in the Bright Republic it had clearly earned the Blackbeak design a lot of renown.

Even if he lacked a number of essential component licenses, he could still purchase a small number of average licenses with his own wealth or his company's wealth. If he wanted to obtain something better, then he could even break open his stash of merits and obtain something good from the Clifford Society.

Ves already considered licensing some supplemental internal component licenses from the Society. A good rifleman mech needed a comprehensive targeting system and various other aids that facilitated accuracy.

He also wasn't entirely able to design a laser rifle from scratch. He still needed a base model to work from because he wasn't about to design a whole host of special components from scratch.

Even when he designed the Tainted Sun, he relied on existing research notes to tide him over in this aspect. In essence, Ves partially plagiarized someone else's work when he designed the graser rifle.

For obvious reasons, it wouldn't be a good idea for Ves to copy the exact same work for his next weapon design. Either he should come up with something original, or leave an obvious papertrail to an existing laser rifle design.

Ves chose to do the latter, because it wouldn't cost him a lot if he wanted to obtain a generic license. He didn't place too many demands on the weapon, so he had no need to work with something expensive.

"Extensive knowledge and good component licenses only form the base of my confidence."

Although it sounded as if he stood above his peers, in fact Ves knew very well that talents could beat him in both aspects. He couldn't forget about Michael Dumont, who had been lying low all this time while ramping up production of his discounted Havalax.

Ves faintly felt as if his rivalry with Dumont hadn't ended yet. Someone was obviously propping him up, because his company certainly wasn't making any profit from selling the Havalax for 50 million credits.

No, the true reason why he felt confident was because he possessed the opportunity to develop a Mastery any time he wanted. While the price was steep, the benefits pushed him up to the same level as the direct disciples of Master Mech Designers.

Only through experiencing the perspective of mech pilots could mech designers develop a mech that fits all of their customer's needs.

Still, Ves had to wince when he saw how much he had to go. He was far too short from reaching 40,000 DP.

According to the rules of the System, he earned 1 DP for every million credits in revenue. To accumulate 40,000 DP, the LMC needed to achieve a turnover of forty billion credits!

That was an insane amount, and couldn't be done in a couple of weeks!

The last time, Ves slowly piled up his DP through a combination of virtual and physical sales of the Blackbeak model, with the former playing the main role. However, the Blackbeak had almost reached its DP cap.

Virtual mechs earned DP a lot faster, but would eventually reached an upper limit where it didn't matter how many virtual copies got sold.

The System treated physical mechs differently. It could potentially deliver Ves a lot DP, but only if he sold them en masse. Right now, his sales hadn't reached that level where it could overtake the DP income of virtual mechs.

The delay grated on him. Until he obtained his Mastery, Ves didn't dare move on to the next phase of his design project.

"I'll figure something out after I collect some feedback. At worst, I'll design another virtual mech."

Ves thought he outgrew the necessity of designing virtual mechs, but reality proved him otherwise. It wasn't really respectable for a mech designer who owned a thriving mech company to go back to the sandbox and dabble with virtual mechs like a kid.

"Oh well, I'll take the hit in reputation so long as I earn enough DP."

After tidying up his lab, Ves exited the labs and private workshop floor and took the elevator up to the fabrication floor.

From weeks of solitude, Ves suddenly experienced a frenetic energy that could only come into being when a large amount of people stayed in the same space. Even though the different halls offered plenty of space, it couldn't obscure the effort poured into the activities that took place.

This was where the LMC fabricated its mechs. Ves smiled as he toured the three fabrication halls currently in use. Each hall hosted its own production line.

The mech technicians all worked seriously around the Dortmund line. As the most advanced production line of the LMC, it required a lot of focus and competence to ensure no flaws emerged in the end products.

As for the other halls, the mech technicians treated them with a little less care, though not too much. The new Benson production lines might not be able to deliver the quality of the Dortmund lines, but they made it up with increased automation and convenience.

Ves spotted Chief Cyril berating a handful of mech technicians slipping up on the job. He quietly approached the man and let him finish his rant.

"Chief."

"Ves." He nodded. "It's about time you left your cave. You've missed a lot. We could have used your help in getting the Benson lines up to speed."

Ves looked at the machines at work and found them to be running smooth. "You didn't need my help. It's best to train the mech technicians into solving their own problems. They can't always run up to us whenever they hit an obstacle."

"Aye. It still took a week longer than necessary to get the production lines on track."

"Are there still any problems related to production?"

"None that requires your attention. Most of my mech technicians have become familiar with working with the Benson machines, and they are already highly familiar with the Blackbeak design. They can pump out silver label Blackbeaks in their sleep."

"That's good to hear." Ves smiled.

When he returned from the Glowing Planet campaign, he relayed some of his experiences to Chief Cyril. After telling the chief technician how awful it was to work with a bunch of sad excuses of mech technicians from Walter's Whalers, he exhorted the chief to step up the training of the LMC's workforce.

Ves would rather stab himself in the chest than to supervise a crowd of lazy bums.

After discussing some routine matters, Ves brought Cyril to a private office where he showed him the draft design.

"What you are seeing now is a draft of my next design. It's a rifleman mech with a number of unique points."

Ves explained the overall parameters of the mechs as well as its special laser crystal rifle and the crystal embedded into the chest.

Chief Cyril scratched his stubble, deep in thought. "You don't go for half-measures, do you? This is a risky design. If you can deliver on your promises, I'm sure your design will be a commercial success."

The premise here was if Ves could actually bring his draft to life without compromising on any of its estimated capabilities. Still, if there was one thing Ves didn't lack, it was skill.

"I'm fairly sure I can manage. Tell me what stands out to you."

"Besides the difficulty of realizing such an ambitious design, I think you're going to have a lot of trouble with the two basic concerns of rifleman mechs. Your energy supply and heat management doesn't look very fantastic."

"My design is almost as efficient as the Blackbeak. Certainly, its top speed is nothing to scoff at, but the Trailblazer engine is able to do more with less."

"That's only the engine. There are other components that suck up a lot of power as well, for example that fancy laser rifle of yours. According to your planning, it's supposed to come with both a rapid-fire and high-energy firing modes. No matter the mode, your mech won't be able to persist very long on the battlefield."

Even if it relied on external battery packs, Ves could still not go over the fact that his mech wouldn't be able to carry too many of them. That would negate all of the advantages of slimming down the mech.

"I'm already aware of the power issues. There are no easy solutions to this problem. As long as the rest of the mech is able to deliver on its promises, I think my customers won't mind too much on this issue."

"It's your call." Chief Cyril shrugged. "The second problem is that the armor looks a little thin. Are you aware that the Veltrex armor system won't work as well when you thin down the layers?"

The Veltrex armor system consisted of three fixed layers of armor plating of different compositions. The Blackbeak enjoyed an ample thickness for each of the three layers, so it was able to make full use of armor system.

Chief Cyril pointed out an uncomfortable truth, and that was that Ves took an armor system meant for knights and applied it to a rifleman mech design.

"It's... a less than ideal use of the Veltrex system, I admit." Ves had to concede his faults. "It's true that I'm driven by practicality when I made this design choice. If I had the option, I would have used another armor system, but I don't think the additional spending is worth it. Even though the Veltrex plating loses a bit of effectiveness when they're applied so thinly, they still perform above average compared to the local market standard."

Ves licensed the Veltrex armor system from Leemar. It couldn't compare against the regular compressed armor licenses that circulated in the Bright Republic.

However, it didn't change the fact that Ves had made a suboptimal design choice.

"Do you think it will affect the market evaluation of my design?"

"Hm. Maybe not. It's not like anyone else but other mech designers care about a slight misuse like this. The critics will torch you for this decision, but in my judgement the mech pilots won't care. It may even be of help to your fans. If

they bought both your Blackbeaks and some copies of this new design, then the logistics of maintaining and repairing them will be a lot simpler."

Compressed armor was very difficult to fabricate and used up a lot of materials. A single outfit would have an extremely hard time trying to carry all of the raw materials of several different premium armor systems.

If multiple mechs used the same armor system, then that drastically lightened the footprint of any outfit. Some mech manufacturers designed a complete portfolio of mechs that shared the same materials for that reason.

"I think the Veltrex armor system has enough flexibility to be applied to any medium mech archetype." Ves concluded after the chief raised this point. "I don't plan on designing every popular archetype with the same armor system, but it's a nice benefit if I can make it work."

Chapter 370 Security Concerns

The issue of earning DP continued to hound Ves. Right now, most of his DP came from selling physical Blackbeak copies. In this regard, his silver label Blackbeaks only earned him a trickle, while the much more abundant bronze label Blackbeaks actually drove most of his DP income.

Even then, domestic sales of the Blackbeak had started to slide now that most of the immediate demand had been met. Elemental Mech Engineering, the third party manufacturer that marketed its products in the domestic market, already informed the LMC that they had already dialed down their production.

Vaun Industrial had picked up the slack, but it wasn't easy trying to introduce a Brighter product into the markets of foreign states. Besides some modest success in the Protectorate and a couple of other states, Vaun had failed to make an impact elsewhere.

"It's going to take at least a month before my DP swells up to 40,000." He judged.

That was a fairly long time, and anything could happen in between. He did not wish to delay his project any more than necessary.

In the meantime, Ves kept collecting feedback from his friends and closest employees. He heard pretty much the same thing about power supply, heat management and the effectiveness of the armor system from everyone, although they focused on different aspects.

Different from last time, the LMC had now grown into a sizable employer. Besides asking other people's opinions in an informal setting, he also got roped into holding a meeting in front of a bunch of marketing managers he didn't even know his company hired.

While they lacked the technical background to understand the nuts and bolts of his design, their understanding of the market provided welcome comments.

"The design looks to be on the thick side when compared to other rifleman mechs. That's not a bad thing per se, but your customers are wondering if the bulk adds enough value to your mech. Rifleman mechs these days come very light."

"The specs look good enough, but I'm afraid it won't give the design enough of an edge compared to the dominant models on the market."

"The crystal projector technology looks very interesting, but most buyers will look at it with a grain of salt. You need to demonstrate this feature in a live exhibition in order to make an impact."

"Your design's appearance looks very neutral and unisex. I think it will be better if you can adjust its profile to be more masculine. That's going to project more strength and make your buyers more confident about purchasing a good product."

The more feedback he gathered, the more he gained a sense on how the market would receive his mech. Ves had to admit the HR department did a good job hiring some insightful folk.

Ever since the LMC moved to the Mech Nursery, Ves noticed that every employee gained a sense of pride and accomplishment. Trading up from the shabby old workshop and a couple of rented offices downtown to a company-owned office and manufacturing complex added a lot of weight and legitimacy to the company.

Another important event happened in between the feedback sessions. Melkor finally brought his newly acquired mechs and mech pilots home. His cousin brought the nucleus of the Avatars of Myth to the mech stables erected close to the center of the Mech Nursery next to where Sanyal-Ablin stashed their own mechs.

When Ves met with Melkor, the newly christened force commander brought along his hired men and women. Their ages trended in the upper range for mech pilots, from the upper thirties to the lower fifties. They all stood at ranks as if they had never left the Mech Corps.

"Are they former servicemen?"

"Most of them have served in the Mech Corps in some capacity as advanced mech pilots." Melkor nodded. "For one reason or another, they sought out jobs in the private sector. Don't worry, they haven't been dishonorably discharged. There are no problems in their background."

"Are they willing to stick around for a decade?"

"As long as we maintain the same level of remuneration, there's nothing to worry about. They're onboard for the long haul as they've all signed a fixed contract."

Ves nodded at his words. Every member of the Avatars of Myth received a very generous amount of compensation, well above the market average in fact. In return, the mech pilots would be obliged to keep their mouths shut and accept hazardous deployments without question.

"That's good. How are they taking their new jobs?"

"We've mostly been training our teamwork and coordination in simulations. We also performed some live-fire exercises, but it's difficult seeing as our knight mechs are supposed to be our backup models."

"I forgot about that." Ves admitted. The Avatars of Myths was meant to pilot his own designs in time once he filled out the other roles. "I'll divert some time to fabricate two exclusive gold label Blackbeaks for your knight pilots."

"We're grateful for that. The sooner you get that done, the earlier we can become a well-oiled machine."

Ves hung around the Avatars of Myth for a while and discussed some matters with Melkor while observing the other mech pilots. From what he had witnessed so far, despite his age, Melkor seemed to have earned the respect of the veteran mech pilots. They didn't treat him like a rookie who was way in over his head.

Maybe Melkor possessed a talent in administration and leadership. He looked like the type of person who was very meticulous and detail-oriented. It remained to be seen if he could keep his cool and direct the Avatars of Myth in an actual battle, however.

"After you've received the two Blackbeaks, when will the Avatars be battle ready?"

Melkor had to think carefully how to answer that question. "They are all competent mech pilots, so there is no questioning their capabilities. They can be deployed immediately in an emergency, but you shouldn't get your hopes up. Without sufficient drilling, they're liable to fight as eight separate mechs rather than a single cohesive squad."

Despite what Melkor might think, Ves knew the importance of improving coordination and building up a rapport. He still possessed some lingering memories from Barley during his first Mastery acquisition.

His evaluation of his cousin went up. No Larkinson was average. He grew more curious about why the Mech Corps let go of Melkor in the first place.

"Did you get into contact with Raella while you recruited your men at Bentheim?"

"I did."

"How is she?"

"She's irritable to me." Melkor answered as he adjusted the visor on his head. "The Larkinsons have openly cut ties with her. Every family member on Rittersberg is aghast at her decision to join the Blood Claws. It's clear she doesn't want anything to do with the Larkinsons right now."

Ves shook his head in regret. Maybe he should have paid her more attention when she'd been assigned as his bodyguard. A small part of him also blamed Dietrich for bringing her to Bentheim and introducing her to the Blood Claws.

Still, there was no use crying over spilled milk.

"Is she happy there?"

"Oh, she certainly is. I think the separation has done some good for her, as the family's expectations for her has weighed her down. Some people aren't meant to bear this kind of pressure. She's found her own lot in life now."

"Well, she can always come back to us if she wants to get out. The Blood Claws aren't exactly the friendliest bunch to hang around with. Gangs aren't exactly the most stable employers in the galaxy."

After commiserating about Raella's fate, they moved on to planning for the future.

"There's a war going on right now." Ves said with apprehension. "While Cloudy Curtain is probably too small to register in the radar of the Vesians, they might look at us as an easy target. Are you prepared to defend the Mech Nursery?"

"Not on our own." Melkor shook his head. "We'll still have to rely on Sanyal-Ablin to do the heavy lifting. Are they contracted to hold against overwhelming odds?"

"Not as of yet. It's too expensive to make them fight to the death. If they face overwhelming odds, they'll prioritize their own lives."

That was the downside of contracting a security company instead of setting up your own force. While security companies sounded more respectable than mercenaries, they essentially shared the same traits.

Just like mercenaries, security companies prioritised their own benefits over the interests of their clients. In order to secure the full backing of Sanyal-Ablin in the event of an overwhelming attack, Ves would need to pay several billions of credits each year.

Even then, they might still cut and run at the end.

Ves would rather invest in the Avatars of Myth than put his faith into Sanyal-Ablin. Although their Konsu Clan origins sufficiently deterred the small fry from pulling any mischief, the Mech Legion wouldn't hold back their punches.

It was not as if the security company stood directly for the Konsu Clan. At most, it represented a single interest group within the massive Coalition partner's political landscape. Plenty of precedents proved that well-connected security companies like SASS purely adhered to the mercenary standard and avoided greater entanglement.

It would be ugly if a group backed by someone in the Gauge Dynasty demolished a group from the Konsu Clan, and the latter followed up on the incident to the highest authority.

Proxy wars should be kept at arm's length.

In a sense, Ves enjoyed the implicit backing of the Clifford Society and Master Olson's extensive network. Standing under their shadows even if Ves wasn't a part of their inner circles saved him a lot of potential trouble.

His enemies couldn't be unscrupulous in their methods to deal with him. Otherwise, Ves would have been subjected to a lot more assassination attempts.

Still, Ves largely considered himself as an independent mech designer. Master Olson opened up a lot of doors for him, but he didn't enjoy her highest favor. That was reserved for direct disciples like Oleg, a freak so smart that Ves suspected that his intelligence had naturally broken past the human limit in his teens.

After commanding Melkor to liaison with Sanyal-Ablin concerning base defense, Ves moved back to the underground fabrication floor and commandeered the Dortmund production line.

He proceeded to spend the next three days on fabricating the gold label Blackbeaks for the Avatars of Myth. He demanded to work on both mechs alone to ensure the highest quality.

The mech technicians around him didn't mind their exclusion at all. In fact, it left them free to observe his confident work methods and the exquisite way he built up the two mechs.

Even though he spent much less time on fabrication than his mech technicians, his every move and action elicited praise from his grease monkeys.

"This is how a real master works!"

"Even Carlos and the chief are left in the dust compared to our boss!"

"How wonderful it is to witness the boss at work. With his skills, he could have easily become the lead fabricator in a major mech manufacturer."

"Hah, lead fabricator? That's too small a job for our boss. Even if a bigshot company from the galactic center offered him a cushy job, he'd be a fool to give up what he built up on his own. Mech design is where his real passion lies."

Ves felt better when he heard the incidental praise, even though they hardly knew anything about the real mech industry. His Assembly Skills and Sub-Skills looked impressive, but any seasoned fabricator in the major mech manufacturers in the Republic could beat him down a notch.

Those who dedicated their entire careers in this field couldn't be underestimated.

Once Ves finished the two mechs, he personally ensured they went to the Avatars of Myth. The two knight pilots looked especially ecstatic to pilot his handcrafted work. His gold label Blackbeaks had earned an exalted reputation among the mech community, and their quality was as revered as their scarcity.

"The two machines will definitely make the men happy." Melkor remarked to Ves. "Once you supply us with other types of mechs, the Avatars of Myth will really go into business then."

They watched on as the cadre of the Avatars surrounded the two artistic machines. The reliefs and carvings that the lower labels lacked elicited a lot of admiration.

Now that Ves had finished his chores, he thought it was time to get back to the main business at hand. He already collected sufficient feedback to make some targeted adjustments to his design. He was itching to go at it, but without possession of a Mastery, the chance of going astray at some point scared him off.

"I need more Design Points." He frowned when he noted he was shy of 20,000 DP away from being able to afford his desired Mastery.