Chapter 371 Rabant Clearwater

His recent foray to the Joe System and his subsequent translocation to the planet that hosted crystal city drained all of his DP.

Ves did not regret the spending. Besides upgrading his Physics Skill to a ludicrous level for his age, he also cracked some of the secrets to alien technology and obtained a highly capable handheld multiscanner.

However, it didn't change the fact that his latest splurge left him in an awkward situation. Even with the help of two third party manufacturers, generating 40 billion credits in revenue could not be accomplished with a single wave of his hand.

"Do I really have to go back to designing a virtual mech?"

It would be the most expedient way to milk some quick DP, but only if he designed his virtual mech fast enough.

If he sped up his design process too much, he'd be liable to cut too many corners and publish a subpar design. All of his care and attention into building up a reputation for quality would go down the drain by then.

"A good reputation is hard to erect but easy to tear down."

He practically cornered himself in terms of delivering consistently high quality products. If he slipped up a single time, his fans and the critics would eat him alive.

The dilemma kept him paralyzed for a couple of hours as he took a break in his private office at the top floor of the headquarters.

"It's awfully empty here."

Lucky had wandered off ever since he left the labs, but he came back after a while. Still, even with the presence of his pet, the office seemed too large for

the purpose. Initially, Ves was impressed by its grandiose enormity, but after time he found he missed his old office back at the now-abandoned workshop.

"How things change."

The LMC moved up and Ves had advanced as well. The changes happened a bit too quickly for him to adjust. From worrying over earning several million credits, to raking in a billion credits each month, a lot of things had changed in a matter of two years. Other mech designers needed a least a decade to growth their businesses to this extent.

A sense of alienation momentarily welled within him. He missed the days when his ambitions only encompassed running a successful mech boutique.

Instead of selling a couple of mechs a month, he sold hundreds of them if he included the third party manufacturers. Each of them sold for at least 60 million credits, well into the upper range of the local mech market, which was an incredible accomplishment for Ves.

"Yet all of this wealth and fame doesn't allow me to do what I want anymore."

Industry insiders watched his every move, waiting to see if he could go further than what he had already achieved. Ves truly couldn't afford to show any signs of weakness. Unlike Michael Dumont, he didn't enjoy strong backing who was willing to hold his hand if he somehow stumbled on his feet.

Only after he calmed his mind did he figure out an appropriate solution.

"If I can't publish a quick and sloppy design in my own identity, then I'll just use another one."

The galactic net was home to trillions of different aliases and identities. It was fairly hard to be completely anonymous on the galactic net, but it could be done as long as he paid the price. Setting up a second identity on Iron Spirit

that had nothing to do with his original Chasing Clouds account required a bit more finesse.

"Iron Spirit is very strict with regards to checking the identities of its designers."

According to their regulations, it was to make sure that the virtual mech designer received the proceeds to the sales of his virtual mechs. In reality, they wanted to keep track of the designers and prevent abuse.

For Ves alone to try to circumvent these identity checks, he'd have to go through a lot of trouble. Luckily, he could turn to other sources for a more convenient solution.

Ves activated his desk terminal and logged into the Clifford Society's virtual portal. His virtual avatar emerged in the city before the mountainous landscape, and he quickly entered the shop region where he scoured for a provider of various shady services.

He eventually found the same shop which previously hacked the Dortmund's processors for him. Ves remembered that the shop offered a lot of other dubious services. He approached the bored-looking man sitting behind a shop counter.

"Hi. Can you arrange a secure second identity for me?"

"For what purposes do you wish you use your second identity?"

"To browse the galactic net and open a second account in Iron Spirit. I don't want any of it traced back to me."

The shop attendant yawned and waved his hand, summoning up a small list of relevant options. "Take your pick and pay up. You'll get your new credentials immediately."

Ves browsed the short list of options and realized that establishing a second identity came with a number of different origins.

The simplest ones consisted of completely faked identities. These would essentially be persons that some shady organization faked into existence by hacking the databases of a planet or state. Most of the time, the hacked planets or states consisted of backwaters with a poor level of monitoring, such as the Mancroft Independent Harbor.

These identities would be extremely shady and easy to mistrust. Many organizations on the galactic net even blanket banned anyone who claimed to hail from some of these places, or implemented rigorous background checks that his new account would almost certainly fail.

The next step up would be to assume an identity of a deceased citizen of a reputable state. These individuals mostly disappeared in ship accidents. Whenever a ship's FTL drive failed or went astray, the occupants wouldn't be heard from ever again. Officially, they'd be designated as missing, and over time they would be marked as deceased.

Identity forgers paid off certain local bureaucrats to quietly remove some individuals from the list of passengers. Officially, the passengers had never boarded the ship that disappeared into nowhere. On the record, they were still alive and well. They just decided to take an extended holiday to some isolated asteroid or something.

While the shop sold even more elaborate identities, Ves didn't have a use for them. After all, he only wanted to do some business on the galactic net. He wasn't planning on selling a physical product, which normally necessitated a much more rigorous false identity.

"I'll take the deceased ID option for a mech designer." Ves said.

"That will be five merits."

The shop actually overcharged Ves for the service. Each merit held an incredible amount of value that couldn't completely be expressed in credits. He doubted that forging a false identity of a missing individual cost more than a hundred-thousand credits.

Still, Ves could at least trust the shop to deliver on its promises and be describe. Otherwise, the Clifford Society would have done something about them by now.

If Ves decided to be stingy and asked for a black market referral from Dietrich, it would be a complete guess whether the forger stuck to the agreement.

A few minutes later, Ves gained the unremarkable identity of Rabant Clearwater, a novice mech designer who disappeared when the passenger ship he traveled on had been chased into FTL by pirates in pursuit a decade ago.

The identity forgers picked out his identity and made sure that no trace of his presence aboard the passenger ship remained in any databases.

The shop promised the identity was foolproof. Short of Mr. Clearwater showing up himself, Ves would not have to worry about the Republic or anyone else besides the shop getting wind of his identity.

"Does the Clifford Society know about my identity as well?"

"Of course." The bored man answered in a tone that made it clear he repeated the same words more than a thousand times. He waved his hand around the entire ship. "This entire virtual space is under constant monitoring by the Clifford Society's AIs. Every transaction is laid bare to them. If you wanted more privacy, then you should have at least visited our physical shop in the Leemar System."

Ves had no time to travel to Coalition space. "I understand. Maybe I'll pay a visit if I need a more solid identity. This one will suffice for now. Thank you for your help."

"You're welcome." The shop attendant said while closing his eyes again. Under his breath, he grumbled some words. "Why am I sitting here by myself. A bot could do the same job ten times better."

With a new identity in hand, Ves felt as if he liberated himself from an invisible cage. The weight of expectations didn't affect him as much anymore now that he could assume the identity of Rabant Clearwater.

To be sure, Ves scoured the galactic net for any traces and indeed found nothing outwardly suspicious. He studied Mr. Clearwater's past and memorized a handful of important details, such as his place of birth, his former residences and the schools he attended.

Everything looked boring and normal, exactly the way Ves liked it. "I can utilize this identity for more than publishing virtual designs."

Perhaps he could also engage in other virtual activities that would be too inconvenient for Ves to attend in his own identity.

After he set up his Rabant identity on his own comm, he went to work. He opened a second Iron Spirit account and rerouted a few million credits through an untraceable method.

Ves didn't need to resort to someone else to do that for him. Compared to falsifying an identity, sending money to another account in an untraceable way was trivial.

Once Iron Spirit finished their automated background check and came up clean, Ves received a prompt to name his account.

He only had to think for a moment before inputting something random. "Crazy War Criminal."

He half expected the name to be used already, but surprisingly enough Iron Spirit actually let Rabant take on this pseudonym.

"Huh, maybe the other mech designers are wimps."

He chose the word crazy because he wanted to use his second account to try all sorts of unconventional designs. He included the words war criminal because he had technically designed and fabricated a taboo weapon.

The others in the game would probably think of his nickname as shameless boasting. Only he knew how true those words described his singular stain in his mech design career.

Now that he took care of all of the hassle, he could finally start to design a quick and easy mech. Ves already formulated some ideas while he arranged his second identity.

"This new account doesn't enjoy any of the renown and reputation of my Chasing Clouds account."

The downside to assuming a new identity was that he couldn't use his public renown to use. His second identity came free of all of his entanglements, both good and bad. Starting over with a blank slate meant that Ves essentially returned to the bottom.

"I already knew I have to pay a price for all of this convenience."

Ves already thought about how to attract enough attention despite his second identity's lack of reputation. He would design something that was both good and crazy. As long as his design attracted enough attention, he would easily be able to sell enough mechs to earn a measly 20,000 DP.

He only cared about accumulating a set amount of DP in the fastest way possible. After he achieved his goal, he couldn't care less on how his crazy design performed in the virtual market. He would leave his second identity alone and go back to it whenever he needed to earn another batch of DP.

"Let's see. Since my real identity is involved with designing knights and rifleman mechs, I shouldn't go for these archetypes. It's probably not a good idea to stick with medium mechs either."

His first choice would be to design a light or heavy mech. Both came with their own pros and cons.

"Which one will I go for?"

Chapter 372 Crazy!

Ves wanted to go crazy. Over the past two years, he gained so many new Skills and experienced so many new things. His enhanced Creativity constantly overflowed his mind with interesting mech concepts.

"I can finally unleash my wildest thoughts!"

Naturally, he had to be somewhat discrete in his methods. If his products under the Crazy War Criminal account resembled his existing offerings under the Chasing Clouds account, then people would easily be able to draw the lines.

That would defeat the purpose of operating a second account.

Therefore, Ves had to adopt a different design method and avoid resorting to the same old methods.

"That won't be much of a challenge. As my Skills keep growing, so do my bag of tricks."

Deeper knowledge allowed for more elaborate branching of methods. Perhaps when he used to be poorly skilled, he could only tentatively utilize a single

method to solve a specific problem. Once his knowledge widened, he became more proficient in applying that specific method, but he also became familiar with alternatives.

"It's like traveling from Cloudy Curtain to Bentheim. Previously, the only way I could travel from star system to star system was to book a second-class ticket on an average passenger ship. Now, I'm still able to travel cheap if I want to, but I can also upgrade to a first-class ticket. Not that I need to, now that I have the Barracuda as my personal corvette."

The same principles applied to mech design. With a broadened perspective, Ves could easily disguise his work by forcing himself to adopt different methods. Though the quality of his work would decline, trying out something different was still a useful exercise.

Considering his options, he preferred to design a heavy mech rather than a light mech due to the wealth of design options available to him. Heavy mechs boasted vastly more weight and volume allowances, enabling Ves to stuff as many systems as he wanted onto a suitable frame.

"The only problem with this option is that it takes a lot of time to design a heavy mech."

Even if he designed a variant based off an existing design, he would still have to spend many hours in modifying and optimizing his frame just to achieve a basic level of quality.

"It's no joke to design a heavy mech."

Ves had never really attempted to design a heavy mech, even a virtual one. The only experience he had with working with heavy mechs was when he took part in the Young Tigers Exhibition. Charlotte Hoffmeister's Kirby made an unforgettable impression to Ves.

He also remembered that his former classmate Patricia Schneider specialized in designing heavy mechs as well. Ever since she got snapped up by Master Null in the Leemar Open Competition, Ves hadn't heard any news of her since.

It would be nice to get in touch with her again, he thought. They shared the same class back at Rittersberg and they had also been the only mech designers from the Bright Republic to have reached the finals in the Open Competition.

Ves even harbored a tentative dream to collaborate on a design.

Sadly, every message he sent to the woman disappeared into a black hole. Ves didn't know if Patricia received his message, let alone deign to send out a reply. The only thing he got out of the Clifford Society was that Patricia had never Leemar even once.

"She's likely taking her time to shore up her foundation."

If Ves was a conventional mech designer, he'd be doing the same thing. Fortunately, the Mech Designer System cut short the time it took for him to expand his knowledge, so he had no need to go to school again.

After a moment of consideration, Ves decided to make the practical choice and chose to design a light mech. Their smaller, slimmer builds left him with very little room for error, but it had the advantage that it didn't take too much time to slap a working mech together.

"It's not worth the effort if it takes more than a week for me to finish a virtual mech design."

In this brief amount of time, Ves wanted to test his capabilities to the limit by rushing together a design that would successfully make an impact in the virtual market. In order to achieve the latter, Ves had to be creative and

design a sufficiently shocking mech to overcome his second account's lack of renown.

Now that he pinned down the weight class, he needed to decide on its star tier and archetype. While he was capable of designing modern 5-star mechs, Ves chose to take a step back and tackle the more modest 3-star range.

3-star mechs might be outdated by more than two-hundred years, but that also made them a lot easier to work with, thereby speeding up his design process.

"3-star mechs are also much more widely sold than 5-star mechs."

The latter may be more prestigious, but they didn't necessarily led to higher sales. Ves wanted to earn a modest sum of 20,000 DP in order to afford his next Mastery. While 5-star mechs came with higher DP caps, thereby ultimately earning Ves a lot more points, it would take months to get that far.

Ves needed immediate short-term gains instead of long-term investments.

As for the archetype, he thought about designing an aerial mech. He hadn't designed much of them, but his increased knowledge base gave him the option of working somewhat well with flight systems.

"I'll be designing an aerial production mech sooner or later, so it might be useful to get some practice."

Thus, Ves settled on a aerial light mech. As for the type, Ves previously designed the Seraphim, which utilized a long-ranged rifle. Therefore, Ves thought about going for a melee type this time.

In general, aerial melee mechs in the light weight class mostly consisted of skirmisher and scout role. They made for ideal mechs to ambush unsuspecting rifleman mechs that fared poorly in a fight up close.

The problem with this combat method was that aerial melee mechs often got shot down before they reached their targets. Light mechs in particular only needed to be hit a couple of times before they started smoking.

Skilled pilots worked around these limitations and ambushed their prey behind obstacles. They trained their patience to a level where they would be willing to hide atop a structure for days until an enemy mech passed by.

Ves couldn't expect the kids who fooled around with 3-star mechs in Iron Spirit to do the same. They craved quick action and wouldn't put up with waiting for more than five minutes in the same spot.

He knew this because his Old Soul and the DarkSpear virtual designs didn't really sell all that well. Even with the partnerships the LMC had struck with the local game centers, not a lot of players chose to pilot these mechs, even for free.

In order to counteract his design's vulnerability to anti-air, Ves needed to come up with some sort of solution.

"Maybe a shield?"

A shield in this weight class wouldn't be of much use. The better choice would be to adopt some sort of stealth or ECM system, but aerial mechs emitted so much heat that it would be impossible to hide it from the sensors of any decent mech.

Ordinarily, a mech designer who faced this problem faced a dead end. If he went through with his choice to design an aerial melee mech, then he'd have to accept the vulnerability inherent in the type without any recourse.

Ves was not an average mech designer. His ability already brought him in the upper ten percent of mech designers, and although it was extremely hard to climb higher at this point, he still refused to be stumped by this problem.

He actually had a very crazy solution in mind.

"An aerial melee mech meant to fight up close needs some protection at the diving stage. Most often, they do so by putting their legs in the way of any incoming fire."

Aerial mechs put much less importance on legs than landbound mechs. After all, even if their legs got torn apart, they could still move around the battlefield, although their balance would be out of whack.

Therefore, the people who piloted aerial mechs had the tendency of using the legs as a disposable form of armor, to the chagrin of their mech technicians.

Medium aerial mechs even possessed enough weight to crush any landbound mech if they stomped their opponents from above. This mode of delivering death from above was highly popular in virtual games, but much less so in reality due to the enormous costs of wrecking a mech's entire pair of legs.

Ves wanted to take this concept of borrowing the falling force of a mech and adopt it to his light mech in a practical way. This would be hard, but Ves already had an idea in mind.

"A light mech can still crush any landbound mech as long as its dive is lengthy enough to build up a lot of momentum. Still, the light mech will usually come out as the loser of this exchange if its targeting a medium mech."

In the worst case, it would be like throwing an egg against a wall. The egg would be completely demolished while the wall hardly noticed the bump.

The story would be different if Ves replaced the egg with a pick.

"A humanoid light mech that flies in the air doesn't need a conventional pair of legs."

Instead of designing a pair of redundant legs, what if Ves replaced it with a single broad spike with enough substance to make for a very sturdy lance?

It would look like a mermaid mech, but instead of replacing the lower body with a flexible tail, Ves wanted to utilize a hard and tough spike built solely to pierce through armor from above.

"This will also solve the deficiency in armor concerning my mech type."

If he added some sort of disposable armor or padding to the exterior of the spike, his light mech would be able to last even longer. Even if this disposable layer couldn't hold on for long, the spike itself consisted of enough solid mass to endure a beating.

As for the upper body, Ves planned on arming his mech with a two-handed hammer. This would be the ideal weapon to deliver the finishing blow after it had come to a stop, preferably after having impaled through an enemy mech.

"A pair of knives won't have the reach to finish off an enemy mech impaled to the ground. Swords and spears won't cut it either as the amount of power behind each blow won't be impressing anybody."

Light mechs possessed a lot less power than medium mechs. Against a decently-armored mech, their blows would more often than not bounce off the armor. Their mech pilots had to build up momentum or put the entire weight of their mechs behind their blows to inflict telling damage.

For his experimental spike-legged mech, such an option wouldn't be practical. It had to finish off a damaged opponent from a temporary state of mobility. Therefore, even if such a weapon would add a lot to the weight, Ves decided to settle for a light but long-handled hammer.

"This sounds like a crazy mech."

Ves leaned back in his chair behind his private workshop terminal and sighed. He decided to do his design work in the confines of his private workshop because he couldn't let anyone else find out about his second account.

With Lucky swatting every spy drone that circumvented the other security measures every hour, Ves did not have to fear any further exposure.

"Still, it's not like I'm completely anonymous. The Clifford Society knows, and so does the shop that sold me this identity."

That was why even if he had the option of incorporating technology derived from taboo weaponry, Ves purposefully chose to avoid going down this route. The 'war criminal' portion in his second handle merely represented his aspiration to break the conventional rules.

"I guess the System succeeded in corrupting some of my morals."

Chapter 373 Heel

Now that Ves finished defining his vision for his light mech, he proceeded to move on to the next phase.

"Should I even go through with the next phase for this design?"

The next step would be to come up with a suitable set of images perform his Triple Division technique to infuse his design with life. However, if he did so, he'd leave an obvious trail of breadcrumbs from his second account back to his primary account.

He shook his head. "Maybe if I use the exact same technique, it might lead to questions. I'll just have to switch up my methods in order to fend off any suspicions."

Therefore, instead of using the Triple Division technique, Ves decided to make use of a single but extremely focused image.

"With a design like this, it can't be piloted in a conventional manner."

An aerial light mech whose primary method of dealing damage consisted of thrusting its single spiked leg from above needed a special brand of crazy to work. Common sense had no place in this half-suicidal method of attack.

Ves decided to construct a single totem animal and infuse its entire instincts into the X-Factor of his design. He had no need for rationality or balance that the base model and human myth images normally provided. Instead, he wanted to achieve a single extreme.

The more he thought about it, the more he became enthused by the prospect of such a mech. "Only crazy people allowed!"

He didn't spend too much time on forming the image. He shaped a narrow-beaked pecker bird into being. He casually named it it the Impaling Bird, which reinforced the idea he came up with for this image.

As a mythical form of life, Ves scaled up the bird to the size of a mech. The mythical bird possessed a fluorescent grey beak that was both sharp and tough. Its main mode of attack consisted of flying fast and embedding its prey with the point of its beak.

Besides delivering a devastating blow with its beak, the Impaling Bird was also capable of finishing off its opponents by slapping it with its wings.

After defining its shape and capabilities, Ves spent a couple of hours constructing a fictional history along with the world in which the bird resided. Details were sparse, but Ves included a lot of different combat situations where the Impaling Bird utilized its beak to great success time and time again.

The Impaling Bird never got tired off runnings its spiked beak through its prey and predators alike. The cruel and primitive bird delighted in staking its entire life in a single attack run. It was a miracle that it hadn't died already.

Once he finished the image, the extreme bird came to life within his mind. Bird immediately moved as if it wanted to cause some trouble in his mind, but when it suddenly noticed the spiritually strong existence of the crystal golem, it instantly became meek.

"You better settle down until I finish your design."

The bird might be suicidal sometimes but it never attempted to attack an opponent out of its league.

After making sure the crystal golem wouldn't come after the Impaling Bird and vica versa, Ves proceeded to move on to his design.

"I can't design a mech without parts."

Even if he chose to design an original mech, he still needed plenty of components to bring his work up to par. He quickly visited the virtual license database and bought a slew of fitting virtual licenses.

Most of his purchases consisted of average components. Ves wanted to keep his prices low to encourage sales. He only made a concession when he bought a separate armor system for the spikes. The new set of plating possessed an extreme amount of resistance against sudden shocks and impacts. It fared less well against heat and laser-based weapons, but Ves accepted this tradeoff as long as it didn't splinter apart after it impaled a mech from above.

As for the other licenses, they fitted aerial light mechs rather well. The major components all specialized in delivering a high level of peak performance. While this limited the endurance of his design, it would at least maximize its chances of success.

"The flight system also deserves some attention."

Ves needed a flight system that could keep up with the demands of his light mech. Ves left efficiency to the wayside and picked out a fairly robust system for a light mech. It was capable of surviving plenty of bumps and could bring an aerial mech back into the air in rapid tempo.

"Too bad it uses up a lot of energy if it does so."

This wasn't a problem in a duel format. Just like the Havalax, his light mech wanted to end the battle quickly and avoid a battle of attrition.

"The more its opponent encounters the move, the more they put up their guard."

Over time, people would become familiar with the tricks of a difficult design. This depressed the performance and win rates of those specialist designs. Disgruntled buyers would flood the sales pages of those mechs, discouraging others from taking the plunge.

"Even if my design will end up being a temporary fad, it's already worth it as long as I can achieve a few thousand sales."

All of the component licenses together set him back several million credits. To Ves, such an expenditure was a drop in the bucket compared to his vast private wealth. Even leaving out his seventy percent ownership in the LMC, he still received several billions credits after Walter's Whalers paid him what they owed according to their agreement.

The most expensive license consisted of the special armor formula that made up the single spiked leg.

With all the ingredients at hand, Ves proceeded to cook up his design over the next six days.

The challenge of drafting an entire frame from scratch always daunted him, but he already benefited from his previous experience. The lessons he learned from drafting the Blackbeak and his upcoming rifleman mech design helped him out a lot.

"It also helps that light mechs don't have a lot of meat to their bones."

While this didn't eliminate all of the complexity, it did cut down on the number-crunching and busywork. Ves spent more time trying to achieve synergy

between the components he picked out than to force his frame to perform to a strict standard.

The only part where he encountered difficulties was when he began to design the bottom spike.

He could have made it thin or thick and broad or narrow. Ves casually tried several different configurations and threw them into a simulator which basically dropped the mech onto a target down below.

Only after he ran the design through simulated combat conditions did he realize how difficult it was to ensure the mech's survival after it had landed.

The spike always broke off if he made it skinny and narrow. While the narrow profile also helped the penetration, allowing his design to pierce through heavy mechs, it also snapped like a twig after every dive.

This gave his design no second opportunities. Ves did not wish for his design to become a useless lump of metal after it had performed a single dive, so he opted for beefier designs.

Once he broadened and deepened the spike, the mech became a lot more resilient. The extra armor sufficiently protected the mech from anti-air and also added extra oomph to every diving attack.

However, if Ves went too far in this direction, his design lost too much mobility. It could barely stay aloft and would take ages to climb up to a higher altitude.

Thus, after experimenting with many different shapes, Ves opted for a configuration that fell in between the two extremes.

The spike was fairly broad at the hips but tapered down to a wicked spike at the end where the feet of the mech normally reached.

When Ves stepped back and looked at his design from a distance, he could almost mistake its silhouette for a woman in a dress.

"Maybe it's not a bad thing if I emphasize its gender a little more."

He shifted some mass around here and there. He basically narrowed the stomach area and widened the hips and upper torso. Naturally, he wouldn't go too far to the extent of being obscene, but he definitely didn't leave any ambiguity on the gender of his design.

Now that he thought about it, a lot of light mechs adopted feminine contours. The weight class lent itself to this profile due to how narrow and light it was. As long as mech designers didn't go too far, nobody paid attention to it. Men wouldn't hesitate to pilot a feminine-looking mech as long as it delivered a solid level of performance.

It also looked kind of absurd for this feminine-looking mech to wield a long, two-handed hammer. The hammer brought a significant amount of heft to the design, and could crush the head of any mech it came in touch with. Sadly, it wouldn't be able to inflict more than a dent to undamaged armor, as Ves hadn't made it as heavy as hammers wielded by medium mechs.

"Still, this hammer will do fine if it strikes a weak point."

The logic behind this somewhat dainty hammer was that his design would strike the hammer through a tear that it opened up beforehand by performing a devastating dive attack. With the power behind such a move, it was inevitable for the stricken mech to expose some of its internals.

A couple of whacks with a powerful enough hammer should be able to wreck the insides with ease.

At the end of his six-day design spree, Ves tentatively concluded that his design made the mark. He nodded in satisfaction. "It's not that much of a challenge to design an original 3-star mech."

The technology available to him was primitive and simplistic compared to the modern standard. Ves easily managed to do the same in front of a crowd during the Leemar Open Competition, though those rushed products came with a large number of flaws and weak points.

"I probably haven't managed to eliminate every flaw in my design, but at least I've addressed all of the critical ones."

Ves had to make due with that result, as his lack of time really limited his options.

For the last couple of days, Ves thought about bringing in someone else to spread out the workload. Carlos formed the most obvious candidate. While Ves did not hold a lot of confidence in his first employee's skills, he possessed enough competence to run some models as long as he received some instruction.

In the end, Ves decided to prize his secrecy over convenience. It was not as if Ves desired to deliver a top notch product. As long as he ensured a basic level of quality, the design would surely sell.

"I think I'm about finished at this point."

He only paused his frenetic design process when he had to come up with a name. During the design process, he went through many possibilities, but all of them failed to click with the design in question.

The name of the mech shouldn't only fit his unconventional design. It also had to call out attention and make it easy for people to refer his mech to their friends.

"The name has to sound good as well."

After half an hour of brainstorming, Ves settled on the best option possible.

"Lady Death's Heel."

The name succinctly summed up the feminine nature of the mech and paired it up with its main mode of combat. Lady Death did not suffer fools gladly. Whenever she encountered an idiot, she crushed them apart beneath the heels of her feet.

Ves smiled when the Impaling Bird finally fled from his mind and took up residence in the finished design. Lady's Death's Heel instantly carried a faintly palpable threat, especially to men like him. The mech and the Impaling Bird made for a fitting pair, especially since the imaginary life form exerted a fair bit of influence on the design.

"Now, let's see how the virtual market reacts to your introduction."

Chapter 374 Womans Mech

To finish the virtual design, Ves had to fabricate a copy personally. He quickly rushed the fabrication within half a day, which was only made possible due to the outdated technology and the state-of-the-art virtual equipment provided by the game.

Ves quickly let the System evaluate his design, but didn't pay much attention to it besides the extra DP he got from finishing the design. The parameters of Lady Death's Heel looked quite good, but it wouldn't astound anyone who came across this strange-looking aerial mech.

Most of the draw came from the design's strange and extreme mode of delivering death from above. Ves hoped that players would take a serious look at this design once they came across its distinctive profile or got wrecked by it in matches.

Unfortunately, Crazy War Criminal's lack of reputation sent his virtual design at the bottom of the heap as soon as Ves published the design. An uncountable amount of designs flooded Iron Spirit each day, and it would take an extraordinary mech to catch fire from out of nowhere.

Even with his peculiar design, Ves had to compete against even crazier eccentric designs that mech designers cooked up on their own.

Still, Ves already had an answer for this problem. He spent the remaining millions of credits in his second account for a short but intense automated ad campaign.

One of the ways in which Iron Spirit made money was to accept paid advertising for their in-game market spaces. Although people only barely paid attention to any form of advertising these days, the exposure alone helped increase the odds that someone would stumble upon it and decide to purchase his product on an impulse.

Naturally, he set the prices to the minimum possible. Ves did not seek out a profit at all, nor did he wish to cultivate a reputation for quality and class. The price range of his products indirectly indicated its status, and Ves sometimes raised his prices higher than the minimum in order to make a better impression on the crowd.

Not this time, though. He wanted to lower the purchasing barrier as much as possible in order to harvest a quick sum of DP.

"Well, now that I've published the design and spent some money on advertising, my job is done. Now it's up to the market and the player base to see whether my new design catches on."

It was an unconventional mech for sure, but Ves held a decent amount of confidence in its appeal. Even if his buyers maintained a little bit of doubt, once they hopped into the cockpit, the Impaling Bird's instincts that suffused the design's X-Factor should quickly influence their perceptions.

A wicked smile appeared on his face as he thought about the impact that would make. He would have never dared to pull off such a stunt with his physical mechs. One of the most dominant traits of humanity was that they

utilized their smarts on the battlefield. Patience, guile and strategy formed the mainstays of their martial prowess.

One reason why humanity predominantly preferred humanoid mechs was because it afforded them the flexibility to employ different approaches.

Ves basically threw all of those complicated considerations away when he designed the Lady Death's Heel. It destroyed its opponents through a combination of two one-dimensional attack modes.

The first strike dealt a crippling blow from above, and the second strike delivered the coup-de-grace.

As long as something went wrong, the Heel would fall in a precarious situation. The lack of legs meant that if its flight system got crippled, it would lose all forms of mobility.

At least other aerial mechs could still use their legs to function as a downgraded landbound mech. Not so for the Heel as its pair of legs had been replaced by a single broad spike that provided the mech with no form of locomotion at all.

"Well, it's not like people care that much in a virtual setting."

What worked on a physical battlefield might not work in a virtual battlefield, and vica versa. Ves prided himself on his understanding of the mech market. Although he couldn't match the breadth and wealth of Marcella Bollinger's market pulse, he always paid attention to these sort of things.

Ves left the Lady Death's Heel to the whims of the market and went on to prepare for the next design phase. He already possessed quite a lot of knowledge, but he hadn't bought any licenses yet, nor gathered any specific knowledge on how to design a laser rifleman mech.

He proceeded to spend the next couple of days on borrowing some relevant books from the Clifford Society's Moon Library. Although he valued his merits very much, the books he borrowed provided extremely valuable first-hand experiences of mech designers trying to design complete rifleman mechs from scratch.

The knowledge contained in these books would benefit each and every ranged mech he designed from this point on, so Ves considered the merits to be well-spent.

"If I'm ever short on merits, I can just do another mission."

Even though most of the Clifford Society's missions came with danger, as long as he could shore up the Avatars of Myth into a competent personal force, he could handle the risks.

Ves quietly worked for several days without checking his sales figures. He didn't wish to procrastinate over each and every sale, and decided to take the initial waiting period as a much-needed break.

When he became bored, he diverted some attention into browsing the MTA's list of component licenses. After finishing his draft design, he had a pretty good idea on what kind of component licenses he needed to acquire to round up his rifleman mech.

He especially paid a lot of attention to different laser rifle models. The weapon model had to be modular and open to extreme adjustments. He disdained the rifle models that came with all sorts of gimmicks and bells and whistles. He was content with a basic rifle with a solid design that didn't cost too much to fabricate.

After four days of placid research, Ves finally couldn't contain himself any longer. He went back to the terminal and logged in with his second identity.

He then visited his Crazy War Criminal's store page and looked at the amount of sales.

"Nine-thousand sales! What?!"

To many mech designers, achieving nine-thousand virtual sales sounded nothing impressive. They could easily achieve such a feat in their sleep. These days, Ves would also be able to reach such a height with his primary identity.

However, to achieve nine-thousand sales in four days with a completely unknown account was something else. Perhaps the handful of millions of credits in advertising money achieved some results, but Ves knew very well that the Lady Death's Heel only fulfilled a tiny niche.

Ves browsed the comments of the Heel's product page and found that most of the players left extremely positive and extremely negative comments.

Those who evaluated his model positively turned out to be those that bought a virtual copy.

"DEATH TO ALL MEN!"

"This is my favorite 3-star mech of all time! It's so womanly! I feel gorgeous piloting this mech, and it feels great to stab a man's head from above, before crushing the area between their legs with the nifty hammer! I love it that it has enough reach to do so!"

"Nutcracker! Nutcracker! Nutcracker!"

"In my professional opinion as an amateur mech pundit, this is the ultimate female empowerment mech. Crazy War Criminal is obviously hell-bent on exterminating men, and has come up with this man-hating mech for the sole purpose of putting the brutes in place. I approve!"

The comments provided Ves with a very colored picture. Evidently, most of his buyers had actually been women. As for the men, they posted extremely negative comments in order to discourage anyone from buying this controversial mech.

"Don't buy this mech! It's ugly! Its legs are too tiny and its butt is too fat! Look at that chest, there's hardly any weight in them! If you want to look like an ugly pear, be my guest, but if you want to look pretty, go elsewhere!"

"I hate this mech! This is a disgrace of an aerial mech! Where is the balance?! My swordsman mech can't do anything but wait for death once this mech decides to pick me out as its target! It's opening strike alone is enough to split my mech in half!"

"Any men who pilots this mech is a disgrace to all men! You gender traitors might as well hand over your man cards and undergo a gender change operation, because you're not welcome among us anymore!"

"Ouch! My nuts! This mech is the living embodiment of an enemy of man! It's a flying war crime that seeks to impale men's behinds and crush their fronts whenever they get the chance to do so! This plague of a mech must be stopped!"

The amount of controversy his latest virtual design had sparked completely overshadowed its initial appeal. Somehow, his mech had turned into a focal point of gender conflict.

Ves scratched his head. He never anticipated such an outcome. He underestimated the frustration of the victims and the passion of its pilots.

"Let me take a look at some footage."

Ves browsed some public recordings and played them back, focusing only on the highlights. Time after time, the Lady Death's Heel dove into their victims from the air.

In the first day, the early adopters struggled to hit their targets. They often found their mechs to be difficult to control during a high-speed dive. Over time, they got the hang of it though, and when they hit their opponents, they almost always managed to cripple them. The convenient hammer that came with the mechs always ensured their targets died.

It was only from the second day onwards that the gender disparity began to widen. The female pilots turned into screeching banshees as they openly taunted their opponents on the open channel.

They even started to dive on their opponents in a shallower angle. Instead of aiming for the head or shoulders of their targets, they instead attempted to impale the lower waist whenever possible.

Front or back, it didn't matter, but it was an unprecedented humiliation for any man to allow a woman to jump their mechs in that kind of fashion.

The Lady Death's Heel quickly gained a reputation for being a maneating mech! Women began to flock to the model while the men tried to stay as far away from the mech as they could.

The local players already started keeping a vigilant eye on the skies. As soon as they spotted an aerial mech, they instantly unleashed every bit of firepower they possessed. They could not let the maneating mech come close!

Ves simply laughed when he saw the polarizing responses to the rise of his mech. All the bluster and energy surrounding his mech would quickly disappear once the fad had blown over. Behind all of the shouting and hating, Ves carefully studied the actual battle performance of the Heel.

Besides a number of talented female pilots, the rest of his buyers hadn't been able to make the most out of their purchases. The Lady Death's Heel could destroy any mech in an instant, but it was incredibly difficult to line up all of the conditions.

In fact, many of his customers actually dropped in their rankings.

Still, the design did its job. Ves easily harvested a bucket load of DP. He earned 5 DP every time he sold a 3-star virtual mech. His near-empty DP balance increased by more than 45,000 DP in a matter of days, and would reach the 50,000 DP cap on earnings before tomorrow.

Ves somewhat regretted designing a 3-star mech. 50,000 DP used to be a fortune to him, but the more he progressed, the more he needed to spend to climb even higher.

"I need millions of DP to upgrade my Vulcaneye and my comm augments."

He relied on his Privacy Shield and the Full Stealth augment for so long that he wanted to improve their capabilities. Ves only bought the entry-level versions so far, and to extend their durations, he needed to accumulate a lot more DP than he had earned up to this point.

"That's going to take a while."

In any case, Ves earned more than enough DP to embark on his next task. A shudder ran through his spine as he looked forward at what his next Mastery would bring.

Chapter 375 Nutcracker

A handful of fanatics came across the Lady Death's Heel in a completely coincidental manner. Ves pushed the mech to the forefront of the catalog with a modest amount of spending. Every player in the Bright Republic encountered images of the mech in a handful of days, but most didn't pay attention to it at all.

They quickly regretted their neglect for this mech. Over a span of a couple of days, it had grown into the latest fad. A decent number of bold girls with plenty of credits or in-game gold to spare started to purchase the Heel by the thousands.

After that, they rained death from the skies.

One of the most successful and iconic Heel pilots was a seventeen year old girl called Irenal. As a daughter of a pair of bureaucrats on Rittersberg, she enjoyed a lot of privilege when she grew up. When the government discovered she possessed the aptitude to pilot a mech, her parents encouraged her to train her potential abilities.

Although she lacked the talent and the drive to work hard, Irenal nevertheless enjoyed so many tutoring sessions that she had reached the top ten percent of her age group. Her parent's money and influence ensured she attended one of Rittersberg's elite mech academies, and she flourished under the high-pressure learning environment.

In actual fact, she had become a little bored of the life of a potentate. She spent most of her time training for class or training according to the schedule made by her tutors. Irenal hardly spent any time with her friends.

Iron Spirit formed an important part of her training as the other simulators played like single-player games. No matter how sophisticated they tried to emulate human mech pilots, they always felt too robotic.

The sheer chaos, genius and unpredictability of fighting against humans taught Irenal to stay on her toes. People pulled off all kinds of crazy things. Since she lived a rather sheltered life among the cultured society of Rittersberg, she constantly got bullied around online.

That all changed when she first saw an ad for the Lady Death's Heel. The distinctive-looking feminine mech appealed to her fashion senses. Its sharp and narrow profile along with its elegant and fashionable curves appealed to her aesthetic sense.

It's highly distinctive fighting style sounded completely different from every other mech she had seen so far. She desperately wanted to stave off her boredom, and an interesting mech like the Heel sounded just about right.

Without any further hesitation, she threw a bunch of credits at the store. "Now, you're mine."

She went over the specs of her latest purchase and understood somewhat on how to use the mech. The Lady Death's Heel excelled against melee landbound mechs. They couldn't retaliate against the aerial light mech when it started its descent.

"On the other hand, a bunch of rifleman mechs will easily be able to chew this mech apart." Irenal bit her lip.

She decided to take the mech for a spin in a massive 200v200 Wartorn Instance. Even though the mech couldn't be run for very long, the Wartorn Instances offered plenty of opportunities to replenish spent supplies. It was more important for her to maximize the chance of encountering a landbound melee mech.

"In duels, it's a complete guess whether I'll face a melee mech or not. I can only pick the largest battle I can enter and find my own targets."

After a short period of waiting, the matchmaking process finished and the players connected onto the hangar that brought all two-hundred mechs in a single place.

Irenal ignored the bickering armchair generals trying to organize the players into following their chosen strategies. She had her own game plan in mind, and it did not entail working together with others.

As soon as the hangar door opened, Irenal engaged the Heel's flight system and flew out. The battlefield this time consisted of a half-frozen aquatic moon environment. This was both good and bad for aerial mechs like the Heel.

"One one hand, the lack of air makes it difficult for the Heel to vent its heat while in the air. On the other hand, it can quickly dump its head onto the frozen ground as long as it lands."

Other aerial mechs that possessed a working pair of legs would find no trouble landing on the ground I was a different case for the Lady Death's Heel, which could not even stand upright on the ground. It had to lay in an unlady-like sprawl when it lost all of its power.

Irenal ignored this minor inconvenience and set out from the base. The instant she dove her consciousness deeper into her mech, she felt some kind of energy passing over her mind. She shuddered a bit as a previously latent desire to kill became a little more prominent.

"I really want to kill someone with this mech."

Her desires became stoked and her bloodthirsty side started to gain strength. She boldly swept towards the enemy side of the battlefield and started to sweep her eyes over the light mechs that occasionally flitted past.

Even though she immediately wanted to make an attack run, she knew that light mechs would not let themselves be caught.

"I've got to find a medium or heavy mech."

After a few minutes of circling, the area became a little more crowded with enemy mechs. She often had to swing her aerial mech away from the anti-air pointed in her direction. After she had been driven out to the periphery of the frontlines, she happened to have encountered a juicy target.

"That's a medium knight! He's all alone!"

Knights almost never moved alone. They always grouped up with at least a single ranged mech in order to cover situations just like this. Irenal grinned, and she started to see red. "Dive, my mech!"

The Lady Death's Heel hovered several kilometers in the air, but abruptly started descending. The lack of air resistance on the battlefield enabled the Heel to dive even faster. Despite this, the mech shook a little as its flight systems exertised its full effort into accelerating the fall.

The knight mech's low-quality sensors finally alerted the pilot to a potential threat from the air. Its main head swiveled towards the air and found a tiny speck closing in. The pilot of the knight started to panic.

"An aerial mech! Damn! I thought this route was safe!"

Due to a lack of better options, the knight pilot controlled his machine to brace itself against the grown. It knelt down on one knee and braced the enormous kite shield against its arms at an angle facing upwards.

The pilot didn't bother trying to dodge. His knight mech was too slow, even if it barely fell into the mediumweight classification.

In the meantime, the more the Lady Death's Heel dove down, the more her passion became stoked. Her heart beat faster as her anticipation ballooned to an unprecedented level. Her smile grew wider and crooked as various thoughts sprung to her mind.

Within seconds, the Heel reached the ground. The knight mech put up a desperate struggle, not quite knowing what it faced. If it knew a little bit more about the Heel, he might have chosen to dodge or find some kind of alcove in the frozen seas.

"Hahahaha! Death from above!"

The collision happened instantly. Irenal underestimated the force her mech brought to bear. Even if she piloted a light mech, they still consisted of many tons of alloys and composites. Not even the thickest mech armor could withstand the power of a falling mech concentrated into a single point.

The Heel's pointed spike mounted on its lower body did its job. It pierced through the knight mech's shield as if it was paper, and proceeded to dump an incredible amount of kinetic energy in its chest. The penetrative qualities of the bottom spike had instantly bumped against the chest armor of the knight, which was one of its best protected portions.

It lasted only milliseconds before the spike ran straight through the frontal armor. Still, the armor did bleed off a decent amount of momentum, so while the spike had managed to pierce through the back, it ran out of steam at that point.

"This.... this mech is fantastic!" Irenal exclaimed, but quickly halted her celebration when she found out the mech below her spike still showed signs of moving. It tried to grasp onto a sword that had fallen a bit away from its fingers.

"Oh no you don't. Your time is finished here."

This time, Irenal remembered that her mech came with a light hammer. She raised the handle of the weapon and swung it down against the torso of the knight. She hadn't meant to aim at anything in particular. She just wanted to wreck the sitting duck apart.

This time, the hammer just happened to fall in front of a very sensitive area to men.

"Yeouch! That hurt!" The other pilot cried over the open channel.

The neural connection between pilots and mechs went both ways. If the pilot got hurt, the mech got hurt, and if the mech got hurt, the pilot received a little damage as well. In the game, this reciprocal connection was kept to a minimum in order to prevent the players from being overwhelmed by pain.

It still felt awfully unpleasant for men to get hit down below.

Irenal grew a little interested at the man's extreme response. Her mech raised its hammer yet again and let it fall on the exact same spot.

"My nuts! Stop it! Please have mercy on me!"

The woman grinned when she heard the pleas. Ordinarily, she should have finished off her opponent and find some other prey in order to tilt the battle in the favor of her team.

Yet some kind of urge held her back from moving on. She wanted to derive more satisfaction against the mech that her mech had mercilessly impaled onto the ground.

The hammer rose and fell for at least a dozen times. The torso area became more dented and broken with each swing of the hammer. The knight adopted a defensive build, so its waist enjoyed a lot of protection.

A single light hammer wielded by a light mech wouldn't be able to break the shell with a couple of swings.

Nevertheless, Irenal didn't mind this at all. Instead, she began to get lost in her own world as the hammer kept banging against the mech's lower waist. Even its engine module broke down from all of the stress and shocks. The knight could not be piloted anymore, and the entire mech turned into a greyed-out mech.

That meant its mech pilot had forcibly logged out of the match. Anyone who left the match prematurely suffered a lot of penalties from the game. The knight pilot suffered so much redirected pain that he couldn't take it anymore.

"Hahahahaha!" Irenal laughed in a deranged manner as her satisfaction broke through the roof. It felt good to hammer down a man. "More!"

Her mech lifted up into the air with difficulty. The brutal collision damaged the spike to the point where it incurred a minor mind.

The woman cared nothing for this, and sought out another prey with gusto. She eventually found an isolated medium swordsman mech and chose to impale it from the skies.

This time, her opponent reacted a little smarter and moved his mech into speeds. It darted along the frozen wastelands in order to make it hard for the Heel to pin it down.

Still, despite its best efforts, Irenal succeeded in predicting its final moments. The swordsman mech became impaled upon the frozen sea. The shock to the Heel was immense, but it had been designed to withstand several of these kinds of shocks in quick suggestion. The mech wouldn't fall apart that easily.

The swordsman mech impaled to the ground started to struggle. It had managed to keep hold of its sword, and began to slash apart the spike that nailed it onto the surface of the moon.

"Nuh-uh. You won't get away from me!"

The hammer banged down against the sword, flicking it out of the swordsman mech's reach with a single blow.

The subsequent hammer blows fell down onto the lower waist of the defenseless swordsman mech. Its pilot howled as Irenal went to town with his mech.

The swordsman mech pilot quickly logged out as well, depriving her of her latest toy.

"Oh well, it's not like I can find a new toy to play with." She said to herself as she lifted her increasingly battered mech to the air.

By the end of the match, she ruined five different mechs. Her mech had become one of the most prominent ones on the battlefield, and everyone who took part in the Wartorn Instance got to see a quick highlight of her actions.

Witnessing the mech demolish five mechs in a row with the exact same brutish methods led to extreme indignation among the men.

"Whoever designed this mech is a devil!"

Chapter 376 Temporal Paradox

The emergence of the Lady Death's Heel slightly disturbed the Bright Republic's virtual mech community. The controversial mech gained notoriety as more and more women flocked to the mech.

Mech industry insiders with nothing better to do started to investigate Crazy War Criminal's background. His sole mech alone aroused a fair bit of attention due to its uneven design.

The account's identity had quickly been traced back to a nobody called Rabant Clearwater. According to the Bright Republic's own records, the man was a Novice Mech Designer that had never joined an influence nor studied at a prestigious institution.

This stumped those who checked his background.

When mech designers studied the Heel's design, they found that it contained a number of very profound traces that only very experienced Journeymen and newly advanced Seniors understood.

"This isn't the work of a Novice Mech Designer!"

However, interspersed with pieces of profound design elements, most of the design adhered to the standard of a well seasoned Apprentice Mech Designer. The dichotomy of profoundness led the researchers to conclude that two different mech designers had worked on the design.

"The lead designer must be a newly advanced Senior Mech Designer. He set the framework of the design and personally worked on detailing a number of key components. After that, his assistant performed most of the grunt work in

a brief amount of time. There are too many traces of sloppiness in the design for it to be a deliberate project."

Due to the lack of evidence, the people who investigated the design came up with an overly elaborate backstory. Crazy War Criminal was obviously a fake account that didn't even try too hard in obscuring its dubious status. No Novice Mech Designer could design a mech of such a level.

Instead, they considered the Lady Death's Heel to be the product of a training exercise of some sorts. The Senior laid down the groundwork while the Apprentice had to complete the design as fast as possible.

As for the reason why the pair decided to publish the aerial light mech design onto Iron Spirit, nobody knew. Anyone who tried to dig any further eventually reached a dead end as the people behind the account left very few traces.

This mystery only formed a tiny interlude in the local mech community. Ves had no idea that people completely mistook second account's identity. Instead, he prepared himself for the upcoming ritual.

Ves first took care of some routine matters. He took care of some overdue paperwork while issuing new instructions to his subordinates in the company.

Ever since the LMC got the new Benson production lines to work, its production capacity almost tripled overnight. The Mech Nursery pumped out three silver label Blackbeaks every two days.

Although the increasingly experienced mech technicians could speed up their rate of production, Ves opted to control the pace and increase the level of quality control. The third party manufacturers may be able to play fast and loose with the rules, but the LMC could ill afford a scandal resulting from delivering faulty products.

"My men can do more." Chief Cyril argued when Ves paid a visit to the fabrication floor. "If we slow down too much, the mech technicians will start to lose their edge. They won't feel challenged anymore."

Ves looked sympathetic at that argument, but stuck to his course. "Even if the men are willing, the machines won't be able to keep up. Neither the Dortmund or the Benson machines are optimized for speed. Pushing them harder than now will certainly lead to errors."

They discussed a few other practical matters as well. Ves wanted to add another testing and quality control phase at the end of the fabrication process in order to ensure that each mech truly performed up to spec.

Chief Cyril actually approved of that. "It's about time the company implements something like that. Almost every medium mech manufacturer tests out their mechs before they send it through their channels. It's going to delay our delivery for at least a day or two, but our products will carry a lot more assurance to our customers."

Setting up this kind of procedure entailed a lot changes in the company's production cycle. Not only did they have to hire a bunch of test pilots to pilot the freshly fabricated Blackbeaks, they also had to hire the supervisors and support crew.

The LMC also needed to clear out a large area and erect an indoor/outdoor testing ground. Without the right facilities, the test pilots wouldn't be able to push the Blackbeaks to their limits. The supervisors also needed a lot of equipment to measure the exact performance of the mechs and catch any alarming deviations before they led to disaster.

Ves threw the problem at Chief Cyril and Jake. "Draw 300 million credits to build up a basic testing ground. We don't need anything too elaborate at the moment."

With that taken care of, Ves wrapped up his work and prepared to go under for a few days. He returned to his private workshop floor and sealed it tight. Lucky followed him up until he reached his bed and laid down.

"I'm going to be experiencing another out-of-body experience for a few days, Lucky. Just keep an eye on my body and don't let anything come close."

"Meow!"

"I'm sorry, you can't come with me. The System is already exerting a lot of its energy to transport my mind across space and time. I don't think it can spare the effort to bring you with me."

"Meow!" Lucky huffed and turned his tail to Ves and flew through a wall.

Ves sighed and turned his attention to his comm. He already possessed more than enough DP to purchase another Mastery.

Just the first tier alone cost 40,000 DP each. Ves did not even consider purchasing the second tier of Masteries at this point. His DP income wouldn't be able to bear the expense.

"Alright, enough stalling. Let's get this over with."

Ves activated the Mech Designer System and entered the Skill Tree. He navigated the all-encompassing trees until he reached the Mastery section.

Each Mastery Sub-Skill offered Ves the precious opportunity to jump in the mind of a mech pilot.

As someone who always prided his secrets, Ves did not feel very comfortable about sharing his mind with another person. When he acquired Knight Mech Mastery I last time, he happened to have clicked with Barley. They worked so well together that Ves looked forward to meeting the mech pilot again.

Too bad he went missing about a decade ago.

Ves sometimes tried to search for Barley's whereabouts but encountered nothing. He started to suspect the System about its choice of pilots. Of all the knight pilots across time and space, why did it pick Barley of all people?

"Can it be that the System deliberately chooses someone who won't be around in this timeline?"

That sounded exactly what the System might do. It would neatly avoid all the inherent paradoxes that ensued whenever someone traveled back and forth in time.

Even with his Senior-level Physics, Ves did not wish to touch the subject of time travel for even a second. The amount of headaches and arguments that ensued from that topic alone could fill an entire galactic library.

For example, what if his mind traveled back in time to a Vesian mech pilot who faced a Larkinson on the battlefield? And what if that Larkinson turned out to be his grandfather Benjamin when he was young?

If the Vesian mech pilot somehow vanquished over Benjamin and killed him off, what would happen to Ves in the future? Would his father and himself still be born? Would a parallel timeline ensue the moment the System brought him back in time, or would the main timeline automatically correct itself and wipe Ves who came from the future out of existence?

Even with all of the wonders of the galaxy, time travel proved to be one of the most elusive phenomena. As far as Ves was aware of, no person, alien or machine successfully traveled back in time.

That did not mean that it couldn't be done, but if some organization managed to do it, they certainly kept their mouths shut.

Some conspiracy theorists spread out rumors that their current timeline had been skewed out of its original trajectory through the constant meddling of

time-traveling agents. A lot of popular dramas revolved around this premise, but everyone dismissed the possibility out of hand.

Ves did not know if he could dismiss the possibility as well. Unlike nearly everyone else, he knew that time travel was definitely possible. He experienced it himself!

From his experienced with Barley alone, he knew that what he influenced in the past would definitely reverberate back to the future.

Before Ves embarked on his next Mastery, he thought about making use of this circumstance. After all, traveling back in time was an extremely rare opportunity to influence the past and correct someone's mistake.

He thought about trying to send a message to himself when he was young. The one thing that Ves had always regretted that he fell into a rut once his mother ostensibly died. He turned into a living zombie who wasted his remaining youth and hardly applied himself in school.

If he got some sort of reality check back then, he might have been able to focus on his studies well enough to attend an upscale institution such as the Leemar Institute of Technology.

"Even if it's possible, should I even do such a thing?"

What would happen to Ves if he induced a major change in his past? Would Ves still be the same Ves, or would he turn into another 'Ves'? What happened when Ves returned to the present timeline. Would he remain the old Ves, or turn into the new 'Ves'?

"What a headache."

His Senior-level Physics taught him a lot about how to improve the components of a mech, but it taught him nothing about the fields that fell

outside of this scope. He still didn't know how an FTL drive worked, let alone figuring out the secrets to time travel.

The only way he could become proficient in those fields was to study them by himself. With his superhuman Intelligence, it wouldn't even take him very long to gain a shallow proficiency in those fields.

"Much of the galaxy revolves around starships. It's useful for me to understand some of the engineering related to these vessels."

Ves always admired the interstellar craft that brought humanity to the stars. However, it always took an extreme amount of learning to become slightly familiar with their systems.

In general, mech designers stayed out of the way of ship designers, and vica versa. Neither occupations spared enough energy to branch out in the other one.

The time that Ves spent on studying starships could have been spent on deepening his knowledge on mechs. In the end, it wasn't beneficial for Ves to allocate more than a couple of hours of spare time to become familiar with ships.

"I can do something about that later. Right now, I have another Mastery to experience."

Ves found the relevant Sub-Skill in the Skill Tree and tapped it with his finger to purchase it. The System instantly deducted 40,000 DP from his account.

[Rifleman Mech Mastery I]

Five.

The System counted down the time. Ves breathed deeply and tried to lay comfortably in his bed. His body would be undergoing stasis while his mind left his body, so Ves did not worry too much about his body''s health.

Four.

Ves hoped the System would pick an entirely different type of mech pilot this time. Barley had been a rather stodgy knight pilot who bought into the whole pomp and circumstance about knights. Ves hoped to experience a more daring pilot who thought offensively instead of defensively.

Three.

"Hopefully the System won't pick a woman this time."

While he had nothing against women, Ves did not wish to deal with a cranky host and make her feel uncomfortable about hosting a male mind.

Two.

On the other hand, experiencing a female's perspective on piloting mech would also enrich him in many other ways. Female mech pilots possessed different habits and concerns, and if Ves became familiar with their gripes, he could make his mechs more compatible with women, who made up around thirty percent of all mech pilots.

One.

A suction force pulled his consciousness from his head and carried it along an incomprehensible tunnel that warped through time and space.

After an indeterminate moment of time, his consciousness forcefully entered the mind of a mech pilot at a different time and space.

Thankfully or regretfully, Ves ended up in the mind of another man. The only problem was that the mech pilot currently fought against an overwhelming force of enemy mechs.

The entry of a new consciousness momentarily disrupted the mech pilot's concentration, and an explosive shell impacted against his rifleman mech, knocking down while heavily damaging its chest plate.

"Get up!"

Ves ended up in the middle of a battlefield on a terrestrial Earth-like planet. Ves looked around the view screens of the cockpit and noted that the battle took place at a fortified military base placed in some kind of mountainous region that made it difficult for landbound mechs to approach.

However, no terrain could truly stop a mech from ascending up a mountain. The enemy mechs carried modular mountaineering equipment that allowed them to scale the mountains with a bit of effort.

In addition to the threat from below, a large amount of aerial mechs systematically harassed the base from the air. While the defenders possessed a lot of anti-air, the sheer numbers arrayed against them slowly overwhelmed these weapon emplacements.

"Get up!" Ves mentally shouted at the consciousness of his current host. "Alven, your comrades are dying! The base is about to be overrun! Your god demands you to fight!"

That brought the man named Alven Callisto out of his daze. A surge of duty, devotion and fury swelled in his mind as he dove back into his mech.

The damaged rifleman mech climbed back up to its feet and resumed firing its laser rifle at the approaching waves of enemy mechs.

While Alven got back on track, Ves took the opportunity to study his current circumstances. The battle took place on Rilrod, a planet ruled by the Holy Dominion of Apellix, a third-rate state from the Rolling Wind Star Sector.

Ves had never heard of this particular star sector, but that wasn't anything strange, as the galaxy was divided into many millions of star sectors. The Rolling Wind Star Sector actually fell within the range of the galactic heartland.

This meant that the level of development was a lot more prosperous than in the galactic rim.

When Ves studied the mechs around him, he realized their prowess surpassed the third-class mechs used by states such as the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom. The mechs actually fell within the range of second-class mechs, which was nothing unusual for a third-rate state in the galactic heartland.

"There is so much wealth laying around here that any casual state can arm their mech forces with second-class mechs!"

"What was that?" Alven asked.

"Nothing! Keep fighting!"

Ves still had to figure out his own situation before he could offer any assistance to his temporary partner. Now that he got a sense of where this battle took place, he tried to figure out how far back in time he traveled.

He quickly read the details from Alven's mind. His metaphorical eyes widened as he realized he traveled twenty-five years ago! That was much closer to the present!

This made it easier for Ves to apply his current knowledge, but it also made it harder for him to analyze the mechs being used at this time period. Most of the mechs used in this conflict consisted of machines from at least two generations back.

Ves possessed a fair amount of experience with lastgen mechs, but he did not study the generation before that too closely. Still, if nothing else, he could make up this deficiency along the way.

When he dove into the background of the war in question, he found out that it was actually a civil war. The Holy Dominion of Apellix worshiped a god

predictably called Apellix. The religion had been founded by a charismatic leader that founded the state more than a millenia ago.

Naturally, the leader proclaimed himself and his progeny to be descended from Apellix. Thereby, his bloodline enjoyed a supreme status in the Dominion.

To an outsider like Ves, the Dominion's history sounded like one giant scam. Inventing your own religion to justify your special privileges was the oldest trick in the book. A fair number of delusional founders turned to religion to solidify their rule.

When Ves peeked at Alven's mind, he found to his regret that the mech pilot was a full-throated orthodox believer in the Church of Apellix. The man had been indoctrinated to believe in the divinity of Apellix to the point where outsiders like Ves would receive a punch in the face if they tried to tell them that they'd been lied to all their lives.

"This is a thorny problem."

Even worse, Alven fought on behalf of the increasingly corrupt Sunstar Dynasty descended from the original founder of the state and church. Each subsequent generation took the power bestowed upon them by a mass of brainwashed sheep for granted. The Holy Dominion grew more oppressive over time,

The current generation of the Sunstar Dynasty regularly indulged in pleasure and often extorted the citizens of the Dominion of their wealth.

Even if the citizens all believed in Apellix, they could only handle so much abuse.

Tensions boiled over in the past couple of years and the Church split into two. The so-called Reformers claimed to be the true believers of Apelllix. The rebel

leaders proclaimed that he received a divine mandate of their god to cleanse the Sunstar Dynasty from the galaxy.

No matter if they spoke the truth, their message resonated among the oppressed. More than half of the Dominion immediately swung over to the rebels, leaving the Sunstar Dynasty in control of a couple of important star systems around the capital.

The planet Rilrod formed a vital part of the loyalists to the Dynasty. This planet contained a lot of advanced factories that produced a lot of mechs each day. It was the non-port system equivalent of Bentheim, and whoever possessed it would gain a decisive advantage in this civil war.

"Alven! Your mech is too damaged! You can't fight on!"

"Don't distract me, spirit!"

Alven shook his head and tried to focus on the fight. His mech jerkily ran back and forth along the mech-sized wall that surrounded the immense military base.

The wall already started crumbling from the sheer weight of fire being thrown in its way. A group of heavy artillery mechs stationed behind a hill constantly shelled the base and its walls with high explosive shells.

If one of those shells hit the Firerunner mech that Alven piloted, Ves could kiss his Mastery experience goodbye.

Still, the mech functioned pretty well even after having all of its chest armor stripped. As Ves studied its design, he became increasingly awed at its well-optimized design. This mech made full use of its materials and squeezed out every bit of performance hidden in the frame.

As the name suggested, the Firerunner excelled in speed and mobility. It possessed a fairly high top speed for a rifleman mech at the cost of not being

able to change its course as fast. This was a normal tradeoff, and Alven already possessed sufficient training to modulate his speed according to the situation at hand.

Currently, Alven weaved the Firerunner in a wave-like motion, dodging most of the fire sent in its way. The wall blocked most of the projectiles, allowing Alven to face much fewer attacks than he should have.

Still, the damage and stress sustained by the Firerunner deeply worried Ves. "Your mech is heavily damaged. The power reactor's compartment has been breached. I estimate this mech will only function without problems for about ten minutes or less. You've got to pull back within that time!"

"What nonsense are you speaking about, spirit! Get out of my head!"

"I'm not some random spirit! I'm a mech designer!"

"What fart are you good for?!"

"I'm from the future! Just read what's on my mind!"

"I don't have time for this nonsense! The priest will expel you later!"

Ves faced a thorny issue. His host didn't care about his presence and wanted him to go. Obviously, Ves did not wish to leave so soon. He was constantly absorbing Alven's experiences as he struggled to fend off the overwhelming waves of rebel mechs.

Even though he warned Alven that the Firerunner wouldn't last, the mech pilot seemed determined to fight to the end.

Although Ves admired Alven's determination to fight, he did not wish to go down with the ship. He turned his attention to the enemy mechs that assaulted the base.

Most of them consisted of rifleman mechs. A handful of knights and other melee mechs acted as their meatshields. The melee mechs even put away their weapons in order to carry thick temporary shields meant for sieging.

Alven's laser rifle fared very poorly against these hastily fabricated slabs of alloys. Ves could tell that the temporary shields mostly consisted of a mix of mundane metals and junk exotics. They possessed no merit other than their thickness. This slowed down the mechs that carried them to a crawl, but that hardly mattered up to this point.

"You're going at it the wrong way!" Ves argued Alven. "Even at your rifle's highest power setting, you can hardly burn a hole through those alloys. It's too thick!"

Alven let out a frustrated growl. He'd been fighting against these shields over an hour, and pretty much all of his laser beams had been neutralized by this awesome defense.

"Then what do you suggest I do!?"

Ves thought about it for a moment. It was easy to point out a mistake, but hard to come up with a solution.

Still, Ves came up with something that stood a decent chance of working, but he needed Alven's cooperation.

"Give me control over your body for a moment. I need to reprogram your laser rifle."

"What?! Never! Begone, you demon! Go back to your pathetic rebellious masters!"

Ves wanted to curse this impenetrable fool. Couldn't he tell that Ves only wanted the best for Alven?

"I'm not part of the rebellion and I'm not some kind of demon! I'm just a mech designer who happened to land within your mind! I never even heard about the Rolling Wind Star Sector in my life. I don't have a stake in this fight!"

"Don't bluster me with your lies, demon! I know what you are! Continue to spout your lies! It will do nothing to shake me from my faith! For the Sunstars! For Apellix!"

Alven's lust for battle grew superheated and he started to take unreasonable risks to get around the heavy shields of his opponents. A couple of times, his Firerunner narrowly escaped death in an attempt to take down the enemy mechs behind the shield.

The situation didn't look so good. The rebels eventually wore out their shields, but they brought out a lot of spares. This pretty much negated the defensive advantage of the defenders. Added with the numerical advantage of the attackers, Alven's situation did not seem so good.

Ten minutes eventually went by and the Firerunner's systems started issuing a lot of alarms.

"Your mech won't last another minute! Eject!"

"No! My faith is strong! The Sunstars shine upon me even now! I can feel it!"

Ves wanted to strangle this stubborn suicidal idiot. This religious nut threatened to cut his precious Mastery experience short, effectively wasting much of his 40,000 DP. He couldn't afford to let Alven die so soon.

If persuasion didn't work, what about coercion?

He never thought about using force against an uncooperative partner. He hit it off with Barley immediately last time, so he never thought about ending up in a situation like this. Ves started to think up some ideas on how to pressure Alven into doing what he wanted.

He took inspiration from the conflict between the images he regularly conjured up for his mech. He particularly took note of the fight between the crystal leader's spiritual remnant and the other two images arrayed against it. What mattered the most in that fight was that the remnant possessed a lot more strength than its opposition.

Ves tried to compare his strength against Alven's and found to his suprise that his mentality was a lot firmer than his host.

"I might be able to pull something off."

He did not wish to kill Alven, nor assimilate the mech pilot into his own mind. Ves only needed to threaten the obstinate pilot a couple of times to get it to do what he wanted.

"Since you're a religious nut, then don't blame me for using your beliefs against you."

If Alven believed that Ves was a demon, then he would act like a demon.

Chapter 378 Mech Demon

Back in the present time, the body of Ves quietly slept on the bed inside the underground private workshop floor. Rather than describe it as sleeping, it had actually been put in a form of stasis, allowing the body to remain healthy even as it did nothing.

Lucky whisked inside the bedroom after doing who-knew-what. The cat missed his owner's touch and meowed softly at the sleeping body.

"Meow."

It was as if Lucky asked when his owner would wake up and pet his head again. After receiving no response, the mechanical cat climbed next to Ves and looked down at his sleeping face.

That face suddenly woke up and broke the stasis put on the body. The eyes whizzed and wirled back and forth before focusing on Lucky's extremely close head.

"Meow!"

That was fast! Why did his owner wake up so fast?

Ves hacked open his mouth for a cough. And another. And another. A strange sound escaped from his mouth as he tried and failed to take control of voice.

After a moment, he gave up and tried to move his limbs instead. He slowly climbed up to a seated position on his bed and jerkily moved his limbs before his eyes.

Lucky stared at Ves and started to feel apprehensive. He bumped one of his paws against Ves, only to elicit not a single scratch or pet from Ves.

"Meow?"

After a moment of contemplation, Ves stood up and took a step forward, only to stumble and drop down on the floor in a painful heap. He hacked open his mouth and strange sounds escaped from his throat that vaguely sounded like frustrated cries.

As Ves attempted to regain control of his faculties, Lucky stared at his body with bewilderment. After a moment, the cat's eyes narrowed into slits.

This wasn't Ves!

In truth, as the System sent the consciousness of Ves out of his body and back in time and space, something else remained inside his mind.

Ves completely forgot about what would happen to the living image of the crystal golem in his absence. The System only brought Ves away, leaving the crystal golem inside the empty and defenseless castle of his body.

After the crystal golem noticed the absence of Ves, it reached out in the empty mind and slowly took on the role of the main consciousness of the body. Its strong mind slowly connected to each and every bodily function until it had completely supplanted Ves as the primary mind of the body.

Although a lot of incompatibility still existed, the crystal golem effectively possessed the body that had been begging to be taken over.

Although the crystal golem lacked the experience to control a human body, it still possessed the capacity to learn. Over the course of several hours, the crystal golem became increasingly proficient at controlling the human body. It became satisfied once its movements rivaled a four year old child.

"I.. I.. am..."

Lucky kept a close eye on his unfamiliar owner atop a cabinet. The only reason why he hadn't attacked the stranger was because the body belonged to Ves. His tail swished predatorily behind his hind body. The cat would only attack if his owner's body attempted to harm itself or leave this this floor.

As for the crystal golem, it tried to recall its name, only to come up empty. Its original spiritual remnant had long forgotten the name of the entity it was part of. As for the crystal golem's current state, it was a completely new life form that only shared a loose relationship with its former identity.

The crystal golem needed its own name. "I... am... Feraxneel."

Somehow, the word rang true within the crystal golem's spirit. It was not the name of its former identity, but the word stood for something powerful for the alien race it used to be a part of. No matter the meaning of the name, Feraxneel felt proud to carry this name.

Feraxneel explored the floor but didn't manage to unlock the security features that blocked its access to the elevators. The possessed body gave up on

leaving the floor and stumbled towards the labs, where it found a number of incomplete crystals inside a couple of lab machines.

The body's eyes gleamed as it beheld these crystals. Some part deep inside the crystal golem's consciousness thought they possessed a lot more potential.

As Feraxneel beheld the crystals, back at the Rolling Wind Star Sector, Ves just ran out of patience with Alven.

Even if the mech pilot was ready to lay down his life for his beliefs, Ves still needed to experience more to make this trip worth the DP he invested in it. His consciousness began to take on a menacing aura before it nipped at Alven's unsuspecting spirit.

Ves immediately pierced through Alven's feeble barriers and began to mess around. This caused the mech pilot to cry out in pain and instinctively pulled back with his mech.

"Your Firerunner won't last much longer! Eject now!"

"Never! Get out of my head, demon!"

"Keep up your stubborn ways and I'll eat your entire spirit! Your soul will never be able to go back to Apellix when you die!"

That scared Alven more than anything. He wasn't eager to die, but he believed he fought for a righteous cause. If the demon in his mind devoured his soul before it could return to the heavenly kingdom, then where would that leave him in his afterlife?

"You evil creature." He hissed and made a quick judgment.

Even as the console of his mech blared in alarm, Alvern still hesitated on the decision to eject. His hand hovered over the lever that would pull the entire cockpit module away from the rest of the frame.

Ves noticed his host's hesitation and lost patience. He attacked Alven's spirit once again but this time aimed to take control over his motor functions. He briefly took control over Alvern's arm and pulled the lever in the mech pilot's stead.

Even though Alven quickly regained control over his rebellious limb, he could do nothing about the fact that his cockpit lifted out of Firerunner and flew back to the center of the base. Anti-air defenses swept the vulnerable cockpit but recognized it as a friendly. A short moment later, the cockpit reached a designated landing ground filled with dozens of discarded cockpits.

Alven gritted his teeth as he slammed open the upper hatch. He climbed out of his smoking cockpit and sprinted towards the nearest mech stables.

Along the way, a couple of servicemen checked him over.

"Halt! Identify yourself!"

"Alven Callisto, of the Puritan Warriors."

One of the guards checked his credentials and confirmed his identity. "Here you go, pilot. Head over to building 5A4-3. A spare mech is waiting for you there."

"Roger that!"

Alven stepped on a small floating platform that swiftly crossed the courtyard and brought him out where he heard the rumbling of explosive shells and the saw the flashes of frequent laser fire in the distance.

Even as looked forward to getting back in the battle, his mind turned inward. Alven regarded the alien presence that entered his mind with an extremely wary attitude.

"Why are you here, demon? Can't you possess someone else's mind."

Ves chuckled and tried to act as demonic as possible. "Since you saw through my facade, let me tell you what I am. I am a mech demon."

"A mech demon?!"

Whatever Alven thought of Ves, he had never heard of mech demons.

"Yes, a mech demon, but I'm not what you think. I'm summoned by the Sunstar Dynasty to help you resist the rebels."

Alven's eyes widened and he stumbled on top of the floating platform. "You... you... the Sunstar Dynasty would never consort with demons!"

"It is the truth. Do you really think you loyalists can insist against the overwhelming assault?"

"Reinforcements are on the way! The base commander told us that we only had to hold out for a few more hours!"

Ves mentally shook his head. "You dunce. Even Apellix himself won't believe those words. If reinforcements was on the way, the rebels would have been much more discrete. What I'm seeing so far is an enemy force that's so confident in their strength that they can batter every reinforcing troop into pieces."

Although Ves made a good argument, Alven shook off the words as an attempt to sway his will to fight. "I will fight to defend the Sunstar Dynasty even if the entire galaxy is arrayed against me!"

Ves sensed the conviction in those words. This Alven was a true believer through and through, which gave Ves very few options to prod Alven to his desired course of action. All he wanted was to keep this idiot alive despite his wish to throw away his life.

He kept himself mum as Alven reached the mech stables. The structure sustained a fair amount of bombardment. A quarter of its stables had

completely collapsed under the weight of fire, which gave the servicemen and mech technicians a lot of trouble keeping the remainder intact.

Alven reported for duty at the duty station, whereupon a frazzled officer assigned him another Firerunner.

"You're a lucky man, Mr. Callisto. This is the last intact Firerunner in our stables. It's a well-used mech, so keep in mind that it won't perform up to spec."

"That's not a problem, sir! As long as it can fight, I'm fine with anything!"

Once Alven reached the Firerunner, his platform lifted him up until he could jump inside the open cockpit. The mech pilot seated himself before bringing the mech online.

The rifleman mech booted up within a minute. Once Alven gained full control over the mech, he drove it out of the stables and went to a nearby weapon rack where it grabbed a random laser rifle.

After that, Alven received his next assignment. His job was to reinforce the southwestern wall where the fighting was the heaviest. The rebels enjoyed much more favorable terrain there. The large amounts of crags and hills gave them a lot of natural cover against direct fire.

Even though Alven hadn't entered battle again, Ves still soaked up the mech pilot's actions like a sponge. He only learned a fair bit about operating a rifleman mech in the earlier battle, but the situation back then had been too chaotic for him to make sense.

This relatively uneventful transit provided him with a good baseline on what to expect. Ves already noted that Alven wielded his laser rifle in a way that would let him bring it to bear really fast. A rifleman mech pilot was always ready to shoot.

"I'm here!" Alven declared as his Firerunner finally reached the broken and fragmented fortifications next to the crumbled southwestern walls.

He wasn't the only mech to reinforce the position. A large amount of defending mechs littered the walls, having tried and failed to hold back the rebels intent on conquering the base.

"Hey! Newbies! Cover us with your rifles!"

Alven obeyed the nameless captain's words and moved to reinforce a heavily battered elite unit of mechs. The rebels outnumbered the defenders at least three-to-one, which meant that the mech pilot immediately landed himself in a precarious situation.

Ves couldn't stay in the background and do nothing. He constantly observed the enemy mechs as they continued to hide behind the thick shields held aloft by various melee mechs.

He knew that if he wanted this battle to turn out to be something else than a massacre, he had to figure out a solution against those incredibly sturdy shields.

The entire loyalist force failed to come up with a solution against those thick shields. While Ves knew how difficult it was to figure out a magic solution, he still had to try.

He entered a deeply analytical state as he combined his visual observation with the scans taken by the Firerunner. He approximated the shield's material composition and tried to dig through his extensive base of knowledge for a way to exploit these materials.

"I got it! Those shields are brittle when subjected to extreme cold!"

No material was completely impervious to every type of damage. The shields used by the rebels consisted of a large amount of fairly cheap materials in

order to mass produce them to arm every melee mech that took part in this assault. With such low quality materials, it was inevitable that a major flaw would persist in the alloy shields.

"Alven! Find a cryo weapon! Find a way to freeze the shields!"

Chapter 379 Bedeviled

Alven had no reason to respond to the demon. Why would he believe in the malignant demon's lies.

"Begone with you, demon! My faith in Apellix is the only aid I need to beat these rebels!"

Ves truly tired of those perfunctory displays of faith. The worst thing about them was that Alven wasn't hypocritical when he said those words.

"Your faith is doing well so far, has it? I'm sure you can outfaith your opponents, but what does that matter if your side is outnumbered by at least three-to-one?"

Short of an intervention by Apellix himself, the battle was as good as lost. Even a bystander like Ves could see that. He tried to broadcast his cold and brutal analysis of the situation to Alven.

The truth hurt much more than any threat spoken by a demon.

Ves showed Alven the dire state of the walls. He showed the pilot the dwindling number of defenders, the lack of reserves, and the excellent state of the attacking mechs.

"This can't be true!" Alven cried out. "The true Dominion never loses!"

If facts didn't work, perhaps another attack on his spirit worked better.

Ves invaded Alven's core and inflicted some mental damage. This caused Alven to lose control of his Firerunner, which almost caused it to hit a shell in the face!

"I'll keep doing this until you listen!"

Alven's resolve weakened a little. "What do I need to do?"

The Dominion pilot hated listening to a demon, even though it pretended to help. Still, if the Sunstar Dynasty summoned the demon themselves, then it probably wouldn't eat his soul.

The defense at the southwestern wall started to falter as fewer reinforcements came to shore them up. The rebel mechs had lost a fair amount of mechs in their offensive push, but they were on the verge of creating a breach.

Ves urged Alven to pull back his mech and head towards the nearest supply point. The Firerunner left the wall to the indignation of the loyalists officers, but neither Ves nor Alven cared for their opinions.

The Firerunner navigated the debris and craters until it arrived at the closest depot.

"Grab a fire hose. The grey one. That's the cryo projector."

With all the complicated materials being used these days, some of them easily caught fire. Bases genetally hosted different extinguishing solutions, one of which happened to be a cryo projector that drastically lowered the temperature of any material.

Cryo projectors weren't available in the galactic rim. Even in the heartland, cryo projectors still used up too much bulk to be used as an independent weapon system for mechs.

Besides, most mechs possessed strong resistance against frost due to the extreme environmental conditions they might be subjected to. This pretty much relegated these kinds of projectors solely for firefighting.

"Grab a hose and point it at an enemy shield formation."

Though Alven still held plenty of doubts, he did as he was asked and grabbed a projector. The hose automatically extended itself from a socket as Alven ran back towards the half-collapsed walls.

"Which setting should I use?"

"Use a concentrated stream. It will take a while for the temperature changes go set in. Aim for the middle of their shields."

Alven proceeded to approach the enemy lines and hosed down the thickest concentration of mechs.

The rebel pilots momentarily panicked before getting back their senses. Why would their shields be vulnerable to being frozen? It hadn't failed them so far.

"It takes a while for the changes to settle in. Blast each shield for around eight seconds. That should be sufficient to wreck them over time."

Soon after, the frozen shields started to crack. As the remaining defenders shot their weapons at the enemy mechs, only to be stopped by the oversized and incredibly thick shields, the slabs of alloys started to crack.

One shield even caved in when shot by a railgun!

Both sides quickly caught on what had happened.

"This is a miracle! Hahahaha! Apellix hasn't abandoned his children in their greatest crisis!"

"Kill the mech with the cryo projector!"

"Protect Callisto's mech! Fifth squad, pull back and grab more cryo projectors. I'll inform command of what's happened!"

Alven's action started a remarkable change on the battlefield. Mechs started grabbing every availanle cryo projector in the base and began to howe down the shields one by one.

The agressors faced an unexpected setback. The rebel mech designer in charge of fabricating the shield even slammed his table back at the rebels' main stronghold on Rilrod.

"The loyalists still have a competent mech designer among them! I thought every Senior and Master has defected to us!"

Another mech designer standing next to him rubbed his chin. "Interesting. All the other elder mech designers in the Dominion are accounted for. Maybe the Sunstar Dynasty managed to hire a guest designer."

"Hmph. Whoever dares to intervene in our revolution will go down with the Sunstars. A single decent mech designer won't save their base from being conquered."

The rebel-aligned mech designers did not speak nonsense. Even after neutralizing most of the shields, the loyalists were still in a precarious situation.

Ves privately made the same judgement as he piggybacked behind Alven's mind as he frantically tried to freeze as many enemy shields as possible.

Eventually, he realized that this base wouldn't last a day. Alven had no chance of surviving past this day. Even if he did the unthinkable and surrendered, the rebels wouldn't take him prisoner.

Wars between religious groups often turned out to be the bloodiest.

The realities of this situation forced Ves to reevaluate his strategy. He already harvested a little bit more of Alven's experience in maneuvering his mech. He only missed out on the most important bit, which was observing him when he fired his laser rifle.

After making a decision, Ves choose an opportune moment to interrupt Alven by making another attempt at invading his Spirit.

"Agh!"

Ves happened to have interrupted Alven at the same time the attackers shot apart his cryo projector. The damaged nozzle spewed out an uncontrollable spray of freezing liquids and gasses before the connection forcefully shut off.

"Are you trying to kill me, demon?! Oh wait, of course you are!"

"Stop whining and get back to shooting!"

Since every other cryo projector was in use, Alven went back to wielding his laser rifle. Ves closely studied Alven's thought processes and instincts as he dove from cover to cover, relying on his Firerunner's mobility to avoid getting pinned down.

The broken walls and the increasing accumulation of rubble, mech wrecks and debris made it harder for the Firerunner to take advantage of its relatively high top speed. It was not the most agile mech by far, and often Alven had to rely on various tricks to get around an obstacle in the way.

"Still, the fluid manner in which Alven navigated the increasingly crowded battlefield gave Ves a lot of insight on what really mattered to a rifleman mech. Alven's proficient use of the Firerunner illustrated that having a high level of agility was not necessary to avoid enemy attacks.

Rather, running fast enough while performing minor changes in velocity and direction proved to be sufficient to throw off the aim of any enemy mech that targeted Alven's mech.

Of course, skill and fervor only brought him so far. His Firerunner regularly got hit by glancing shots that Alven failed to dodge in the nick of time. Ves mentally frowned again. At this rate, the Firerunner would be chewed up before Alven could reveal all of his piloting skill.

Ves quickly analyzed the enemy mechs and tried to figure out their weaknesses.

"Those red railgunners pack a punch, but they run out of projectiles rather fast. Just stay away from them while they focus their fire on you."

"The laser rifleman mechs draw much of their power from the modular backpack module. If you can manage to damage the backpack's integrity, a lot of failsafes will set in, disabling the extra power source entirely."

"Don't bother trying to wear down their knights. Those models are built to withstand lasers. Leave them to the railgunners."

One major difference between the galactic heartland and the galactic rim was that railguns supplanted the role of ballistic rifles entirely. Though they lacked in versatility, they more than made up for it in sheer power. The ability to send out a huge kinetic impact was extremely useful in breaking apart the enemy's trutleshells.

Alven intensely disliked Ves. He outright ignored the sensible advice and stuck to his old ways. This frustrated Ves to no end and forced him to teach another lesson to Alven's spirit.

"AAHHH! That hurts!"

The forceful invasion unsettled Alven and disrupted his fighting pattern. The Firerunner stumbled again and attracted a lot of enemy firepower for a moment.

"Listen to me or suffer!"

"Evil! You're pure evil!"

Ves needed to prod Alven several times in order for him to follow his suggestions. His battle performance instantly improved by a significant

margin. Despite this success, Alven thought that Ves had performed some demonic witchcraft to accomplish such a result.

Alven became crazed from the pressure exerted by the demon. Somehow, Alven became a rabid dog, and channeled nothing but his instincts and the core of his training to resist the relentless rebels that sought to overrun the southwestern walls.

Much of the reason why Alven fought so hard was because Ves learned how to manipulate his spirit. As he became more familiar with spiritual attacks, he realized he could do something else than inflict pain.

"It's much like assimilation, but instead of taking over his entire spirit, I can choose to affect a couple of aspects."

Even though his attacks looked crude and did a lot more damage than necessary, Ves enjoyed a strong advantage over Alven in terms of mental strength. This left the mech pilot helpless.

If not for being in a position of control, Ves would have gotten spooked that such a thing was even possible, although he doubted a lot of humans could perform such an attack. Only through extremely special circumstances did Ves end up in Alven's mind.

"Callisto!" A loyalist officer barked over the comm. "This is no time for heroics! You are disrupting our defensive lines! Fall back to the inner defense lines!"

The gratuitous mental damage inflicted by Ves caused Alven to disregard the order. Ves had to prod Alven yet again in order to turn around.

Ves noticed that the more he intervened, the less Alven became capable of thinking rationally. By now, he'd gone halfway feral. He fought on mostly through instinct and training. While that helped Ves understand the most important skills to rifleman mech pilots, he did not wish for Alven to die so soon.

He decided to do something drastic. He wanted to take over Alven's mind entirely.

The action came with a lot of risk, but as long as he did not completely assimilate Alven's damaged mind, then the act would still be reversible. Ves had no intention of taking over a religious nut's mind.

After deciding on his course of action, Ves practically swarmed over Alven's mind. His previous attacks wore out the mech pilot's defenses, so he could offer no substantial opposition to the takeover.

Alven screamed and instinctively pulled back. His Firerunner went from fighting a pitched battle to fleeing as fast as possible. The remaining loyalists all looked at Alven's mech like it had gone mad, but they quickly turned their attention back to the attacking mechs.

If Ves had to describe his takeover, he would say that his mind turned into a blanket that covered Alven's most essential elements of self. They represented his consciousness and formed the main control center of his body and mind.

When Ves covered himself over those elements, Ves effectively captured Alven's consciousness and hijacked its connection to Alven's body and mind. For a brief period of time, Ves was Alven.

A flood of information streamed into his mind, but Ves blocked most of it, only letting the purest piloting instincts go through.

"Let's see if I can pilot a mech this way."

When Ves gained sufficient control over the process, he attempted to interface with the Firerunner.

"AAAAHH!"

Alven cried out in pain yet again, but this time it was Ves who suffered the brunt. The neural interface might have connected with Alven's brains, but it was Ves who attempted to connect with the mech, not the original consciousness.

Ves thought to circumvent his inability to pilot a mech by hijacking Alven's body and mind, but it seemed that things weren't so simple.

The pain caused Ves to eject from Alven's spirit. His own spirit sustained a moderate amount of damage as well, and he was in no shape to make another attack. Not that it mattered, because Alven's mind received so many shocks he effectively turned into an idiot.

Without any active control, the Firerunner collapsed. This turned it into a sitting duck and a magnet for enemy fire. Less than thirty seconds later, the mech blew up.

Chapter 380 Crystal Cube

When the Firerunner blew up, some force grabbed Ves' consciousness and pulled him back to his present time and space.

His mind came back online in his own body, but he felt an enormous amount of fatigue. The brief but intense ordeal on Rilrod severely taxed his spirit.

As he took a brief rest, he looked around and found to his alarm that his body hadn't woken up in his bed. Instead, his body somehow ended up in the lab!

Ves jumped off the chair and looked around for anyone who could have moved his body here. "Who's there! What did you do to me?"

The only thing that greeted him was a bemused Lucky. The gem cat meowed at him as if he was relieved that Ves had returned to his senses.

Ves looked back at the lab machine and found to his surprise that it looked a lot different from when he previously left it. The most important change was that a strange cube the size of his palm rested in the lab machine.

Last he recalled, he only left a tiny crystal the size of a thumb in the machine!

The clues painted a rather unsettling picture. Ves turned his attention inward and regarded the crystal golem that temporarily resided in his mind.

"Did you take over my body?"

The reconstructed spirit flashed some sort of emotion. Ves thought he sensed satisfaction from the imaginary entity.

"You did, didn't you?!"

Even if he knew, it was not as if Ves could do anything about it. Despite the crystal golem's unorthodox birth, its strength of spirit was still incomparably pure. Ves wasn't sure he could overpower the spirit in a mental battle.

He left the crystal golem alone and beheld the strange crystal cube. He tentatively picked it up and studied it from all sides. He detected nothing unique about the crystal, but the matter probably wasn't so simple. He whipped out his Vulcaneye and made a quick scan.

The multiscanner spat out a bunch of dense readings. Ves only took a second to interpret the data. An enormous amount of miniature circuits had been packed inside the crystal cube!

That almost caused Ves to drop the scanner. What had the crystal golem been up to? Why did he create this cube? What did the circuits do?

He recalled the crystal city's ability to harness light and briefly suspected the cube to be some sort of weapons interface. However, the circuits in the crystal cube did not match the circuits of the crystal spires.

Seeing as the crystal cube was inert, Ves felt disinclined to study it further. "I'm severely behind schedule in designing my rifleman mech. I can't afford to waste any time on fanciful alien technology."

His most recent Mastery still stayed fresh on his memory. Ves wanted to leverage his experiences into elevating his second original design as fast as possible before the details became vague.

Thus, after making a brief decision, Ves entered the elevator and went down to the restricted vault. He deposited the strange crystal cube in one of the lockboxes and left it there for later.

After that, he returned to his private workshop floor and freshened up before putting himself in his best condition. He thought back on his experience with Alven and found that it was a shame the experience ended too soon.

"I don't know why the System chose to partner me up with an obstinate fellow like him. Even if he wasn't a religious nut, he was already doomed to die that day."

He couldn't help but add a mental complaint to the System. Why put him in a hopeless situation where defeat was imminent? Couldn't it have given Ves more time to absorb some experiences?

Fortunately for Ves, he already went through a Mastery before. His time with Barley taught him a lot of general knowledge around piloting that was applicable to any kind of mech.

Armed with this foreknowledge, Ves skipped much of the things he learned before and could devote his full effort into deciphering and understanding the experiences that specifically pertained to rifleman mechs.

"It's barely enough."

To be honest, Ves truly felt he got the short end of the stick this time. Even leaving out the common elements, his harvest disappointed him somewhat. Still, he had to work with what he got.

"No matter what, I'm still a better mech designer than before."

Just to make sure he hadn't hallucinated the entire trip, Ves looked up the Rolling Wind Star Sector on the galactic net.

"It actually exists! It also has the Holy Dominion of Apellix!"

He quickly browsed its recent history and found that the dominant religion had indeed undergone a schism some time ago. To his astonishment, the loyalists who served the founding Sunstar Dynasty actually made a comeback late in the war.

Long after Alven perished on Rilrod, the loyalists obtained a lot of outside help that repelled the rebels from deposing the Sunstar Dynasty and erect another holy leader to helm the third-rate state.

In the end, Alven got his wish, and the Sunstar Dynasty still stood standing, although they paid a heavy price to hang on to their current position of power.

Ves failed to uncover any traces of Alven. He'd been an average pilot before Ves entered the mech pilot's mind, and did not live long enough to make a lasting impact.

"Well, enough dilly-dallying around. No matter what I think of Alven, he's long-dead now. I don't have to worry about his vengeful ghost coming to haunt me in the coming days."

The System's selection of Alven Callisto prompted Ves to believe it definitely intended to pick only those marked for death as his Mastery partners.

Before, he considered the decision to be a detriment that deprived him of helpers. After finding out that he might be hitchhiking in the minds of uncooperative people, he drastically changed his opinion.

"It's better if my partners can't do any damage to me in the future. Unless they're as friendly as Barley, I should attempt to kill off my partners the next time I redeem another Mastery."

With no further barriers to designing his next mech, Ves proceeded to pick up his work again. Before he could do the actual designing, he first had to purchase a couple more licenses.

He already set aside a handful of licenses and only held off on acquiring them if his newly acquired Mastery offered no protest.

"Hm, these licenses still look good. There's no problem in snapping them all up."

Ves proceeded to buy a number of small components meant to improve a mech's ability to wield a laser rifle. They consisted of components that improved precision, various targeting aids and an advanced processor specialized in parsing all of the data.

Ves remembered that he drew a sensor system from a golden lottery ticket a while ago. He briefly inspected it and found out that it was a long-ranged mech sensor primarily used by light mechs. Although he could implement it in his current design, it wouldn't be able to reach its maximum theoretical range due to all the interference from his mech's other systems.

"It's also too expensive to mass produce right now." He frowned when he checked the raw materials needed to build the sensor module.

Despite taking up a small amount of space, the module alone might cost up to twenty million credits to fabricate. That was way too much for a single secondary component. The main reason why the price jacked up so much was because the license made use of exotics that Ves had to import from another star sector.

Ves decided to purchase a native sensor system instead, one that seamlessly integrated with the targeting system he recently acquired. After finishing his purchases, the company account decreased by about 800 million credits, which was a hefty amount, but a necessary investment nonetheless.

Different from last time, it took a lot of effort for the LMC's financial department to release the funds. Along with the company's growth, its financial controls had tightened up as well. Ves could no longer draw on the account directly, but had to submit a lot of forms in order to obtain the necessary funds.

Even though it took a couple of hours for the financial department to release the funds, Ves didn't begrudge the accountants for taking their time.

"It's good that they're checking where the money flows. We can't have a scammer trying to pretend he's me and swindle my company out of all of our liquid funds."

After all of the paperwork went through, the LMC gained a couple more licenses for Ves to use in his designs. At this point, Ves met all of the conditions to complete his next design. He breathed deeply and began to channel the crystal golem. He connected with its spirit and invited it to share his senses and take part in the design process.

The crystal golem eagerly accepted the invitation and melded closer to Ves. Unlike his own attempts at smothering Alven's spirit, the crystal golem faced a willing human.

Both of them mutually intertwined themselves, causing Ves to enter a supremely elevated state where two minds instead of one was at work.

A small part inside him believed that this state would engender a much stronger X-Factor for his design. It might even be possible to breach past his bottleneck this time!

"Let's get to work!"

Ves called up a design program and loaded in his draft design before fleshing it out. Ves already set a vision for his rifleman mech to be a consummate run-and-gunner. Borrowing from Alven's experiences, he tweaked the draft design

to enable it to reach a slightly higher top speed in exchange for a bit less agility.

He also planned in other deviations from the original draft. These mostly consisted of minor tweaks and changes in configuration that rifleman mech pilots appreciated.

Once he finished modifying his draft, he went on to design the actual mech.

As usual, he started from the interior of his mech and worked his way outwards. He defined the internal frame of the mech and planned the placement of the various core components of the mech such as the engine, cockpit and power reactor.

The rifleman mech envisioned by Ves would be a fairly slimmed down medium mech, so he wouldn't have a lot of room to work with. This presented a lot of challenges to Ves, as he had to stuff all kinds of components inside his mech without any of it spilling out.

He had to make some sacrifices in order to obtain sufficient room. After a few minutes of contemplation, he made his choice.

"I can cut back on the redundancy since it's not supposed to be a damage sponge. I still need to implement sufficient compartmentalization considering that this mech remaining space will be stuffed with energy cells."

Many rifleman mech models often skipped out on redundancy. This weakened the mech in the event of sustaining crippling damage. The loss of a vital component would severely impact the battle readiness of the mech.

Ves accepted the trade-off because it was the least bad choice available to him. He considered expanding the bulk of the mech to be unacceptable as it would severely impact his design's mobility.

His experience with Alven taught him that rifleman mechs needed as much mobility as possible. While Ves faced a lot of limits on speed and agility with his decision to stick to the medium weight class, his design could at least withstand a decent amount of enemy fire.

While it sounded as if Ves made a lot of compromises, Ves strongly believed the end product would still perform to a decent standard. The nature of designing anything involved making a lot of trade-offs.

The key factor that distinguished good designers from the bad was the ability to make the most favorable exchanges possible. This minimized the loss in performance and kept the overall specs of their designs close to their most optimal ideal state.

His current vision for his mech hinged on providing a lot of mobility, a decent amount of firepower and just enough armor to grant it a couple of extra lives.

Of course, Ves also hoped his gimmick would play a role in increasing the value of his design.

"I'll have to arrange an entirely different internal structure to accommodate the center crystal."

Just because Ves intended to make use of large laser propagator based on alien technology did not mean he could slot it in the chest of his design like any other component.