

## Mech 4331

### Chapter 4331 Buried Treasure

The Gauge Dynasty colonized Pima Prime V less than a decade ago.

Compared to the centuries-old settlements of the Friday Coalition, cities such as Ardam were practically babies!

The main reason why Ardam looked a lot larger and more developed than other settlements was because the Gauge Dynasty concentrated a huge amount of effort and resources into its construction.

Pima Prime was meant to function as a popular trading hub, so the presence of a large and well-built city was essential to facilitating transactions and attracting lots of business.

However, despite all of the rapid buildup, there were many places where the capital city showed its lack of age.

The many estates that occupied the best locations in Ardam were too new, for example. The passage of time had yet to age the facades and gardens to a point where they acquired an ancient air that served as proof of a family's heritage.

Despite this shortcoming and more, Lucky cared little about the kind of people that resided in these luxurious estates. The cat had lived in a place that was just as opulent if not more back in Davute.

In fact, it was Lucky's familiarity with all of the panic rooms, secret arsenals, escape tunnels and hidden vaults that the Larkinsons had built underneath the so-called Royal Mansion that he knew that he would be able to find a lot of hidden wealth today!

If someone like Ves was paranoid and cautious enough to stuff all kinds of hidden goods underneath his former home in Davute, the powerful and

wealthy Gaugers who occupied the surrounding mansions should be no different!

Lucky skillfully navigated the underground landscape, relying on his powerful and sophisticated sensors to orient himself and prevent himself from getting lost.

He descended around 655 meters before he bumped into a square metal vault that was located directly underneath the biggest and most central mansion in the rich district.

Lucky did not impulsively tried to phase through the metal wall but instead circled around in order to survey the strange construction.

"Meow?"

What was weird about this vault was that it was completely enclosed and inaccessible. There were no obvious entrances on any of its sides. There weren't even any tunnels that allowed people to approach this hidden site.

If that wasn't enough, the vault was also covered by an external layer of sensor-dampening materials.

Lucky was no stranger to them as the Larkinson Clan also made use of them to hide its own stuff.

The materials employed by the builders of this secret vault were even better and more effective, allowing it to escape detection when the Larkinsons and other parties swept the city with penetrating scans.

The biggest reason why Lucky managed to detect this secret vault was because he was extraordinarily sensitive towards large concentrations of metal.

His nose was his best sensor! Nothing could beat his determination to eat the most valuable exotic materials within his reach!

Though the vault he found was highly suspicious, Lucky did not sense any acute threats. Knowing that time was of the essence, the gem cat slowly intruded the vault by phasing through its bottom side.

The training that Lucky received from the Black Cats had taught him that hidden vaults like these tended to have a lot of protection against intrusions.

This time was no different, but unfortunately for the owner of this vault, Lucky had also been trained on how to circumvent and disable all of these security precautions!

The cat never emerged in the open and continually remained in a phased state while he was passing through solid matter.

Along the way, his claws or his teeth skillfully snapped power lines, control chips, transmitters and other important security measures.

Lucky showed no impatience as he methodically disarmed the security system by himself. It was only after he was certain that nothing important would trip anymore that he cautiously poked out a black tail from the floor.

When no hidden laser turret or biological guard monster emerged to destroy this tail did Lucky poke out his ears from the surface.

No sounds. No vibrations. No obvious activity.

"Meow."

Lucky finally mustered up the courage to emerge inside the dark and silent vault.

Though the interior of this secret hideout was completely engulfed in darkness, Lucky possessed plenty of other ways to survey his surroundings.

For a moment, the vault completely disappointed him. There were no stacks of precious metal bars or containers filled with phasewater in sight.

The metal interior was completely empty and devoid of any crates, data chips, precious art or any other treasures that rich people usually stuffed in their hidden vaults.

Instead, the large hall was completely dominated by a single object, one that was so large and tall that the vault hardly had any room for other sizable objects!

"Meow?!"

As someone who had accompanied Ves for around a decade, there was no way that Lucky would be able to mistake the sight of a mech!

After confirming that the mech was completely inert and inactive, Lucky cautiously floated upwards while circling around its massive frame that was slumbering in the dark.

Lucky's exceptionally sensitive nose was already able to develop an impression of the quality of the materials used to construct the mech.

It immediately became clear to him that the mech was not a cheap or standard product. The exotics and other materials were too powerful for that. It did not take much time for the gem cat to conclude that he stumbled upon an expert mech!

"Meow meow."

After a few more seconds of examination, Lucky found out that it was special even among other machines of its kind.

The design and the materials were so good that Lucky judged it to be a high-tier expert mech!

The gem cat's clear green eyes glowed in the dark. Drool already leaked from his tongue as Lucky thought of all of the yummy materials he absorbed from a high-tier expert mech.

"Meow meow."

The cat grew a bit more curious about the expert mech.

Why was it hiding all the way down here?

Why hadn't the Gaugers used it during the battle in orbit?

How come its owner neglected to evacuate such a valuable mech before the invading forces reached the planet?

The soft green glow emanating from Lucky's eyes raked across a portion of the upper body of the expert mech and happened to expose a few markings.

One word immediately caught the cat's attention.

AMADEUS

"Meow?!"

Realization dawned on Lucky's feline face. It turned out that he had inadvertently stumbled upon the vault that belonged to Saint Jeremiah Gauge himself!

The Amadeus was the high-tier expert mech that Jeremiah had once earned a lot of acclaim with during his participation in the Komodo War.

The Sundered Phalanx had engaged in many offensive operations and campaigns that resulted in many pitched battles against hardened Hexer troops.

Despite his high pedigree, Jeremiah Gauge did not shirk his responsibilities and actively sought out powerful enemy Hexer expert mechs.

He became notable in how many powerful Hexer heroes he managed to defeat by relying on his pure and highly polished swordsmanship.

Sure enough. When Lucky flew to the back of the Amadeus, he was able to spot the famed sword that had accompanied the high-tier expert mech for a long time.

Jeremiah had piloted the Amadeus long enough for him to develop a close relationship with the expert mech. Even if it wasn't a living mech, years of getting exposed to a powerful expert pilot caused it to be affected by an extraordinary influence that transformed it in many subtle ways.

That wasn't the only reason why this expert mech was special.

What turned it into a particularly precious and unique expert mech was that it was the machine that helped Jeremiah undergo his second apotheosis!

The Amadeus was the machine that Jeremiah achieved Sainthood with! That alone was enough for it to gain the qualification to be displayed in a prestigious museum!

The story became clear to Lucky. Saint Jeremiah may have gained a new ace mech after his breakthrough, but he couldn't bring himself to let go of his old machine.

The ace pilot brought his expert mech with him to the Red Ocean and buried it deep below his personal mansion in order to keep it safe and fairly close at hand.

As a cat that accompanied Ves or his family almost every day, Lucky was well aware of the significance of this historical expert mech.

The original Amadeus not only contained a wealth of Fridayman tech and design applications, but could also facilitate research into the growth of mechs and the effect of willpower baptism on non-living mechs.

The value of the Amadeus was already high to most people, but it was even more precious in the hands of a mech designer like Ves!

It was practically a certainty that Ves would be able to learn a lot of lessons and derive a lot of inspiration from studying this expert mech!

Ace pilots were rare throughout human space and the chance of encountering them and their ace mechs were practically minimal.

Though Ves still had opportunities to get in touch with Patriarch Reginald and his Mars, it was not as if he could randomly visit the Cross Clan to poke around as he wished.

Besides, there was only so much data he could gather from a single.

As long as he was able to obtain the Amadeus and study it in detail, Ves could make comparisons and figure out additional details that eluded him in previous studies.

He could derive additional insights if he was able to study the Neo Amadeus and the remains of Saint Jeremiah Gauge that Patriarch Reginald had claimed as his spoils!

The mysteries surrounding ace pilots and what it took for an expert pilot to take the next step would become a lot clearer to Ves if he was able to gain possession of this crucial link.

It was not impossible for Ves to speed up his possible advancement to Senior if Lucky brought back word of the Amadeus!

"Meow."

Gloriana could also benefit a lot from studying the high-tier expert mech as well. No matter how much she hated the Fridaymen, their Masters were extremely competent in designing mechs.

Lucky paused for an entire minute before he decided how to handle this discovery.

"Meow."

Half an hour later, a certain black-clad cat popped out of the ground and returned to the surface of Pima Prime V.

His tail playfully swished back and forth while his belly seemed to strain against his Misfortune Harness a bit more than usual.

An incredibly lazy and satisfied expression graced his expression.

"Meeeeoooooww..."

An invisible intelligence operative made contact with Lucky now that he entered into communications range again.

"You're finally back. Where have you been, Lucky? Did you discover anything good?"

The cat let out a soft burp.

"I take it you found something but claimed it all for yourself, am I correct?"

Lucky nodded. "Meeooooowwww..."

"Did you leave anything for our clan?"

"Meow meow..."

"Can you be mindful about sharing your finds next time? I don't want to return empty-handed. Will you at least be able to hold back next time you find a hidden stash? You look as if you have already eaten your dinner. Is your stomach full? It has to be. There is no way a cat as small as you can strip the entire planet of metals."

"Meow..."

"Well, let's proceed. We still have plenty of hours left to explore the buried treasures that other elites have left behind. I haven't been idle all of this time. I took the liberty of using my scanners to examine the neighboring estates. I



have marked a few lots that might contain other worthwhile goods. Can you take a closer look at these locations and inform me of your findings?"

"Meow meow."

Lucky was in a great mood right now. He did not mind giving the rest of the Larkinson Clan a bone. After all, he had already obtained the grand prize as far as he was concerned!

### **Chapter 4332 Heirloom Collections**

Lucky performed his duties more diligently now that he was working on a full stomach.

Of course, that didn't stop him from eating 'snacks' from time to time, but that only drove him to work harder.

The gem cat's diligent search allowed him to uncover one hidden hiding hole after another.

The rich district of Ardham concentrated many of the movers and shakers of the Gaugers who had transferred to the Red Ocean.

These were individuals who founded the colony, invested in the businesses that went on to dominate the local economy and occupied the top of the chain of command of the Sundered Phalanx mech divisions stationed in the port system.

Practically none of the aforementioned elites possessed grassroots identities. They were all descendants of the Gauge Dynasty or emerged from the most powerful families and organizations rooted in the territory of the coalition partner.

Whatever the case, the figures that formed the upper echelon of the Gauge Dynasty's presence in the Red Ocean were so wealthy and powerful that they were bound to own a lot of valuable assets!

Lucky managed to stumble upon a lot of useful finds during his exploration of the vaults and storehouses the wealthy Gaugers built underneath their exclusive plots of land.

The quality and effectiveness of the anti-detection technology applied to these underground treasure houses was considerably high.

None of them had been marked in any maps or intelligence reports.

The sensors and scanners of many second-class mechs and starships didn't have the capabilities to detect most of them. The only way for the Larkinsons to pick up all of this hidden wealth was to use a powerful scanner at full power to sweep the ground at close range.

It would have taken a lot of Light Hunter mechs a lot of time to sweep the entire rich district in this fashion!

If the Larkinson Clan had a week of time to plunder the star system, then it wouldn't have been a big deal for the Flagrant Vandals to find and dig out all of the stashes.

The schedule was too tight to accommodate carpet searches. This was why the Larkinsons and their allies largely skipped the rich district despite being able to guess that there ought to be plenty of worthwhile treasures for the taking. They simply had better goals to chase after in the limited time they had available.

Fortunately, the Larkinson Clan had Lucky. His effectiveness in detecting and breaking into the vaults was higher than expected. His performance clearly improved as his capabilities expanded. He also became more familiar with how the wealthy Gaugers tended to hide their stuff.

Despite finding a lot of hidden vaults, not all of them were filled with treasure. The elites who owned them had emptied them all out, but at least half of them were surprisingly untouched.

Perhaps their owners ran away from the Pima Prime System too quickly for them to think about emptying their vaults.

Perhaps the owners weren't able to reserve enough cargo space to bring much of their valuable cargo.

Perhaps the owners were confident in the measures they took to hide their vaults and expected to return with their treasures in place after a few months.

Whatever the case, the Larkinson Clan dispatched additional digging machines and personnel to the rich district in order to retrieve all of the valuables that had been left behind!

Though Lucky regularly took bites out of valuable exotics and technological products, he surrendered most of the loot to the Larkinson Clan.

When Ves obtained constant updates on what his cat was able to uncover from the rich district, even he became surprised at all of the rich loot that was steadily being brought back to the fleet in orbit.

Gloriana stepped forward and skimmed the expanding list. "If I knew the Fridaymen were stupid enough to leave so many valuable assets behind, I would have send out Lucky down to the surface earlier. I can't believe how many strategic materials they left untouched."

Though Ves was happy to read the list of all of the medium and high-grade exotics that the raiding parties were digging up, he also tempered his expectations.

"While the variety of these materials are great, their quantities are not as impressive. I have no idea what these people are using them for. None of us have any use of these rare and obscure exotics. I suppose we can add them to our strategic materials reserve and wait for a time where we just happened to have a use for them, but honestly speaking I feel tempted to just add them to Lucky's meal plans."

Unlike materials such as phasewater that were both valuable, powerful and widely applicable, a lot of other exotic materials were not as useless.

For example, there were exotics on the list that were only relevant to aquatic mechs.

There were also other valuable rocks and metals that didn't even have any useful properties for mechs. Their main use in human society was to serve as materials for the creation of fine art!

"The materials might not be enough for us to build or upgrade mechs, but they can still be used to develop powerful new equipment." Gloriana mentioned. "If nothing else, we can sell the excess and earn an extra 150,000 MTA credits for our troubles."

Selling the high-value materials was a last resort as far as Ves was concerned. Though he was always happy to earn more money, he would rather put the plundered materials to better use. Perhaps he might make them available to the other mech designers in his employ if he couldn't find a use for them himself.

Ves smiled. "Materials aren't the only treasures that Lucky has managed to find for us. We've also obtained a small arsenal's worth of heirloom-grade weapons, shield generators and even a single-use emergency personal teleporter."

He was incredibly surprised to hear about the latter. A personal teleporter was a life-saving device that was extremely rare in second-rate states but was a lot more common in first-rate states.

Though the first-raters also possessed the technology to block the personal teleporters from doing their jobs, in general they were still highly precious tools that could save people's lives during crisis situations.

Ves was tempted to claim this personal teleportation gadget for himself, but the risks were too great. Who knew what kind of backdoors and security precautions they contained.

He didn't know how teleportation technology worked at all. How could he entrust his body and life to a piece of high technology that could contain all kinds of malicious programming?

Perhaps this teleporter might randomly transport him inside the thrusters of an active starship or dump him deep within the gravity well of a gas giant!

It was too wasteful to ignore it, though.

"Do you have a good way to examine the personal teleporter and make it safe enough for us to use?" Ves asked his wife.

Gloriana crossed her arms. "Our clan doesn't have the required expertise. You should pass it on to friendly associates and see what they can make of it. The Hex Federation has plenty of—"

"—No Hexers." Ves interrupted his wife.

"...I suppose you can give it to Master Benedict Cortez or maybe Professor Neihy Almar of Melmen Advanced Systems. We have formed a good cooperation with both."

Those were better suggestions. Perhaps Ves might be able to barter the personal teleporter along with other valuable goods for additional shares in the development company.

Ves continued to study the list of goods that Lucky had sniffed out. Though there weren't any items on the list that exceeded the value and utility of the personal teleporter, he was quite surprised by the amount of masterwork weapons that had been stored in these underground vaults.

The rich and powerful apparently had a habit of building secret arsenals where they hung up all of their finest weapons and gear onto walls.

A lot of these weapons tended to be older relics that the ancestors of the owners utilized in the past.

The technology of these old guns were horribly outdated. Some vaults even stored heirloom weapons that dated back to the Age of Conquest!

Though the stories behind these historical weapons weren't entirely clear, he held serious doubts about whether they originated from the ancestors of their current owners.

Since they undoubtedly came from a time before the Friday Coalition existed, it was anything but certain that they had any ties to the Gaugers or the Fridaymen!

"Maybe their owners are collectors."

Regardless of the providence of these ancient heirlooms, Ves was incredibly interested in getting his hands on them. His growth-oriented design philosophy made him sensitive to all sorts of products that got used and taken care of over many years.

If Ves' suspicions were correct, at least a part of these ancient guns and tech might contain the remnants of their past owners.

Ves could study the spiritual remnants and experiment on them in order to deepen his theoretical framework and gain a better idea on how to handle the reconstruction of the Shield of Samar.

Perhaps it might be useful to practice a new approach by attempting to upgrade all of these outdated heirlooms to modern standards.

"A part of the gear retrieved from the vaults are masterworks." Gloriana pointed out. "These are great research materials for me. Make sure to reserve

them for my use. I have never ceased my attempts to figure out how to increase my chances of making a masterwork mech."

"Got it." Ves nodded. "By the way, our retrieval parties also pulled out plenty of data storage devices from the vaults. Most of the contents are encrypted and will take a lot of time to crack. I wonder what they contain."

His wife rolled his eyes. "Don't get too excited. The members of powerful families and dynasties don't tend to store any incriminating data in their vaults, so don't expect to find any shocking news. These sorts of people typically fill up their data chips with ledgers, historical records, family trees, ancient contracts and so on. While this sort of data and information still has a certain amount of value, you are better off with passing them on to DIVA."

"Hmm... I suppose you're right."

It only makes sense to hold onto this specific data if Ves had plans to target the Fridaymen in the future.

If he was hellbent on waging war on the Friday Colonies, then it would definitely be useful to meddle in the internal politics of his enemies!

Ves had no plans to waste his time on tormenting the Fridaymen any further. He did not mind it if he could exploit their weaknesses again, but it currently wasn't profitable for his clan to launch another attack on the Friday Colonies.

The Trailblazer Expedition was of much greater significance to him. As far as he was concerned, Operation Saturday Market turned out to be a fruitful practice exercise to his clan.

The Larkinsons not only confirmed their strength and ability to respond to threats.

They also grew and matured in many ways, allowing them to become a lot more prepared to handle future crises in the future!

"How long will our forces remain on the surface?" Gloriana asked. "Numerous scattered Fridaymen fleets have already entered the star system. They're currently consolidating their forces, but it will only be a matter of time before they are ready to launch a counterattack."

As much as she enjoyed the fact that the Fridaymen got beat up in this operation, she still prioritized the safety of her children.

"It won't take long anymore. Our schedule hasn't changed. If nothing unexpected happens, we'll pull out in six hours."

"I am sure the locals will erupt in celebration as soon as we have made our departure." Gloriana quipped.

The locals would be glad to see the plunderers and raiders leave their ruined homes. They all wanted this nightmare to end!

### **Chapter 4333 The Long Wwait**

Hundreds of artillery mechs steadily bombarded one of the last industrial districts of Ardam with their cannons. A continuous stream of straight and powerful disruptor beams struck the titan shield, causing it to wobble and destabilize at a rapid rate.

Different from the models employed by the Hex Army, the Transcendent Punisher Mark II did not possess any 'traditional' artillery armaments.

This was not a surprise considering that the Larkinson Clan designed it to function as a bunker mech first and foremost.

Battles in space tended to start at longer distances. Terrain features were almost entirely absent in the void. Both of these factors meant that the best artillery mechs tended to be outfitted with weapon systems that could accurately pound distant targets that were within line of sight.



If there was any desire to attack targets that happened to be blocked by other obstacles, a mech force would usually field machines that were equipped with missiles.

Currently, the use of missile weapons happened to have dropped off in the Red Ocean. Though it was cheap and easy to build them and to equip them onto mechs, making use of them required the constant consumption of costly missiles.

It took a good amount of money to produce missiles that were fast and powerful enough to threaten mechs and other targets. Their warheads had to incorporate volatile exotics that were troublesome or expensive to source.

In a region that was suffering from a galaxy-wide resource shortage, it could be at least ten times as costly to make use of missile-based mechs as opposed to other kinds of ranged mechs!

As such, neither the Hexers nor the Golden Skullers fielded missileer mechs in larger numbers. They most definitely had their uses, but they simply weren't economical yet to earn their place on the battlefield.

This left the Larkinson Army in a rather awkward position. The Transcendent Punisher Mark II did not possess the capability to inflict heavy damage through indirect fire.

Sure, it was possible to utilize its gauss weapons as siege weapons by pointing them at high angles in the air so that their projectiles eventually dropped on top of their targets, but the specific weapon systems weren't designed or optimized for this kind of usage.

The Hexer heavy artillery mechs were able to remain in the outskirts of Ardam and fire their explosive or incendiary shells at any target in the city regardless of the obstacles in their way. The tall structures of the more developed parts of the urban districts could not block the arcing shells in the slightest.

In fact, the Hexers didn't mind destroying every structure in the way. The only reason why they did not waste too much time on it was because their time was too limited to pound everything to rubble.

This was why they utilized incendiary shells instead. They only had to fire a few salvos to engulf a rich commercial district in flames that were hot enough to slowly melt fortified buildings!

"The titan shield is about to collapse." Commander Melkor Larkinson spoke to his fellow legion commander. "Be sure to have your men knock out the turrets inside as soon as possible. They have already dealt enough damage to our knight warriors."

Commander Taon Melin curtly nodded. "Our artillery mechs have already set their targets in advance. We are already familiar with this routine."

The Avatars of Myth led the assault on this specific industrial district, but they did not particularly excel in siege warfare.

This was why the Eye of Ylvaine had split up its artillery mech units and attached them to numerous different assault groups. Otherwise the other mech legions might take ages to overcome the strong and resilient titan shields that the Fridaymen used in large numbers throughout their settlements.

Though the remnants of the Sundered Phalanx still retained a good amount of combat power, neither of the legion commanders took their opposition seriously anymore.

The Fridaymen had dispersed their mech units too much for any of them to be able to stop the attacks on different strongholds.

For example, according to the intelligence gathered by the Black Cats, the industrial district in front of the Larkinson mechs was occupied by just 200 or so mechs, with at least half of them consisting of Planetary Guard mechs.

The Avatars of Myth along with the Eye of Ylvaine brought almost twice as much mechs in total, and their overall combat power was greater than that of the machines of the opposition.

"The titan shield is collapsing in three, two, one, go!"

A loud frazzled noise spread throughout the air as the mighty titan shield finally succumbed from getting attacked by all of the disruptor beams fired by the Transcendent Punisher Mark II's.

The heavy artillery mechs no longer fired any disruptor beams from their luminar crystal energy cannons, but that did not mean their role had come to an end.

The Ylvainan mech pilots immediately opened fire with their gauss cannons and instantly bombarded the exposed laser turrets that had been firing at the Larkinson mechs on a continuous basis!

Meanwhile, the Avatars of Myth took action as well. Their melee mechs advanced forward at a steady pace and mostly focused their efforts on defeating the Fridayman mechs that were putting up a futile effort to defend their stronghold.

Though the defenders initially enjoyed a considerable defensive advantage due to the presence of walls, bunkers and other defensive fixtures, the Transcendent Punishers easily blasted them open by relying on concentrated bombardment.

After that, the Avatars of Myth sent forth Redaxes in order to widen the breach and chop apart any enemy mechs in the way.

In the end, the Avatars and Ylvainans succeeded in uprooting all forms of heavy resistance from the industrial district.

Though there were still a lot of scattered infantry soldiers stirring up trouble at different locations, their rocket launchers hardly posed a threat against the Larkinson mechs.

The two legion commanders relaxed now that their forces had managed to break open yet another industrial district. Follow-up troops had already arrived to clean up the remaining resistance and plunder another batch of resources from the local manufacturing complexes.

Of course, those privately-owned factories tended to possess defenses of their own, but it only took a single mech company at most to secure these places.

Not everyone was as paranoid and cautious as the Larkinson Clan.

Both Taon and Melkor found the time to chat about numerous topics.

"I thought you would have broken through during this battle for certain."

Commander Melkor carefully spoke to his fellow legion commander. "You've been an expert candidate for many years. That should be more than enough time for you to take the next step. You and your fellow Ylvainans fought hard against the Witch Shatterers in the last battle."

Commander Taon let out a tired breath. "My time has not yet come. I am afraid I have to disappoint you. Our clan will have to wait for a longer time before it can welcome its first expert pilot that excels in heavy artillery mechs."

A lot of clansmen looked forward to Taon's breakthrough. Though the Larkinson Clan no longer suffered an acute shortage in expert ranged mechs, the Amaranto, the Minerva and the Promethea did not excel in unleashing mass destruction.

Their precision was great and they were good at using their distinct advantages to defeat different types of opponents, but when it came to matters such as siege warfare, the three expert mechs still fell short.

This was why Taon's status as a pilot was of great significance to the Larkinson Clan. The longer it took for him to break through, the longer the Larkinson Army had to go on without a siege machine that could make jobs such as breaking open titan shields a lot easier.

"Do you have any confidence in your chances of breaking through?" Melkor asked. "Maybe you should focus more on your training and less on handling the administration of your mech legion. After several years of growth, there has to be mech officers within your ranks that can take over your responsibilities."

Taon shook his head again. "That is true, but I am aware of my own problems. I have trained my skills as closely to my current limitations as possible. Spending any further time on deepening my abilities won't benefit me anymore. My problem is more... philosophical."

"Oh. I see. Is it a mental thing?"

"You can say that." Taon frankly admitted. "I have approached numerous expert pilots in the past in order to hear what they have to say. Most of them tell me that I have too much faith."

"Too much faith? That... shouldn't be a problem, right? There are plenty of warriors who believe in something but are still capable of breaking through in the end. Just look at the Hexers for example. The Handmaidens of Death are hardcore believers in Helena and the Superior Mother, but they are still making a lot of progress."

"That is true, Melkor, but there are still differences. The Hexers may have faith, but they still hold on to the principle that they must become strong as well. Their pride and their conceit compels them to push themselves beyond their limits."

"It sounds like you have a good understanding of your specific problem. Why haven't you been able to overcome it, Taon?"

"Perhaps... it is because I don't feel enough urgency. There are so many strong heroes in our clan that I am often in a position that doesn't require me to do anything special. If the expert pilots of our clan can't take care of a threat by themselves, our clan can always make use of battle formations to launch powerful attacks. Even if we have exhausted all of our own measures, we can still lean on the help of Patriarch Reginald Cross and the Mars to bail us out. With all of these powerful elements, my role has become indispensable, especially when I am often stationed in the rear."

Melkor wanted to scratch his head. "This sounds like a familiar problem. In the past, we didn't have many expert pilots, and it was easy for a powerful enemy to outnumber the ones we had. Our situation is a lot different now. We just welcomed three new expert pilots in our ranks, so our pressure has been reduced."

"This is a good development for our clan." Taon stated. "The only regret is that it might not be as good for my own development."

It was not necessarily good to gather too many expert pilots together. Studies had shown that subsequent breakthroughs happened at a lower rate. This was because the ordinary mech pilots no longer tended to push themselves beyond their limits during crisis situations, but increasingly hoped that the existing expert pilots would save them instead.

This was why many mech militaries tried to spread out their expert pilots as much as possible. The presence of one or two per mech regiment provided enough protection to the troops, but did not make them complacent to the point where they constantly expected their heroes to clean up after their messes.

"Why not switch to another mech?" Melkor curiously asked. "You don't have to remain stuck in the rear while piloting your custom Transcendent Punisher mech. Your Eye of Ylvaine also fields lancer mechs. Those Transcendent Chargers have impaled many Fridayman mechs during the last battle, but they have also received fierce counterattacks in return. I bet your chances of breaking through while piloting a melee mech like this will be a lot higher."

Taon adopted a rueful smile. "I did think about that, but... our clan doesn't need an expert lancer mech. A machine like the Point Break of the Sundered Phalanx is not a useful addition to our lineup. If I break through while piloting a Transcendent Charger, my talents and abilities will develop in a way that will help me become stronger while piloting lancer mechs. That is not my goal. My plan is to continue to pilot a heavy artillery mech and wait for the day that I can finally become the hero that the Larkinson needs."

That... was a difficult but noble determination. Melkor had nothing to say against that. If he was in Taon's place, he probably wouldn't have been able to resist the temptation of becoming a demigod.

There were countless mech pilots in existence that were willing to do anything to undergo apotheosis! None of them cared about the circumstances of their breakthroughs so long as they actually succeeded in advancing!

"I wish you good luck, then. I truly hope you will be rewarded for your effort."

"I know I will. I just don't know when it will happen." Taon whispered back.

### **Chapter 4334 Stunted Growth**

At least Commander Taon Melin still had hope of advancing to expert pilot.

By becoming a demigod, Taon eventually had hope of becoming a god pilot. No matter how improbable it was for him to reach the end of this extraordinary journey, his opportunities were still greater than that of Melkor!

Melkor did not harbor much envy or jealousy towards his fellow legion commander. Not everyone was as talented or fortunate as Commander Casella Ingvar, who was able to combine leadership with her own individual progression.

Not every Larkinson needed to become a high-ranking mech pilot in order to feel validation. There were plenty of other ways for people like Melkor to make himself useful to the clan. His role was just as indispensable as that of the mech pilots that sacrificed portions of their humanity in order to attain their version of godhood.

Even so, there was still a selfish part within his mind that felt it was regretful that he would never be able to fulfill his childhood dreams.

While Melkor tried his best to set aside his fanciful notions, a certain shuttle had just entered one of the hangar bays of the Hemmington Cross.

Ves, Gloriana and a small honor guard emerged from the vehicle and met a couple of attendants from the Cross Clan.

"Master Benedict is awaiting your arrival at his workshop. Please proceed further into our ship."

The Larkinson visitors followed the attendants along a familiar route. Both Ves and Gloriana already knew the way to the workshop, but they exhibited no impatience despite the fact that they were incredibly eager to see what the Cross Clan had to offer this time.

The couple finally passed through a security check and entered a rather messy workshop.

The Mars was currently absent because the troops on the surface of Pima Prime V could use its incredible firepower to breach enemy titan shields and strongholds faster.



Even though it was not that good for the damaged ace mech to strain itself further without receiving extensive repairs, the Crossers thought it was acceptable to make light use of its firepower during a time where its powerful guns were needed the most.

As long as the Fridayman didn't have a chance to launch an attack on the invading forces, it didn't matter if the Mars wore out a bit further.

For the time being, the workshop was dominated by several wrecks. Ves recognized numerous high-value wrecks. The Crossers had taken out their fair share of enemy expert mechs during the previous battle.

According to the rules that the Hexers and the Golden Skullers agreed upon, whoever finished off an enemy had the right to claim the resulting salvage.

Though the Larkinson Clan was able to defeat a considerably higher number of enemy expert mechs and claim a portion of the wreckage, the Cross Clan definitely obtained the most valuable remains without a doubt!

This was because Patriarch Reginald not only managed to defeat the Neo Amadeus, but also bring it back in its entirety!

"So this is the Neo Amadeus." Gloriana whispered with awe in her tone. "It is not as imposing as the Mars, but that does not detract from its excellent design. I can still sense the determination to fight from its broken frame."

Ves was able to sense much more than that. His sensitivity towards living mechs was much higher.

One of the reasons why he looked forward to this visit was because this was the first time that he would be able to study a genuine third-party ace mech up close.

One of the biggest questions he had in his mind was whether ace mechs developed by other mech designers had the capacity to become alive.

The willpower of an ace pilot was incredible. Their ability to baptize their own machines and elevate their performance was remarkable. Ves hypothesized that it was definitely possible for ace pilots such as Saint Jeremiah Gauge to be able to impart life into their own machines!

Even if they did not set out to foster an independent personality within their own ace mechs, their unconscious desires might lead them to do so anyway.

As Ves opened up his spiritual senses and examined the inactive but still reasonably whole ace mech, he sensed numerous familiar elements.

"It's alive." He voiced his first impression. "If only barely."

Compared to the full and rounded living mechs of his own making, the Neo Amadeus was incomparably worse!

Gloriana glanced curiously at her husband. "How would you describe the difference?"

"It's difficult to explain. The best way that I can put it is that my living mechs can breed life that is comparable to humans like you and I. They were set up to grow that way from the beginning because I have always structured their spiritual foundations in the right ways. Whoever designed the Neo Amadeus never put any thought into that, so this ace mech gradually formed its own form of life due to the feelings that Saint Jeremiah developed for his latest machine. It's a shame that he only had it for a few years. I would have loved to examine its state after it has been used for a couple of decades."

"You still haven't clarified the differences, Ves."

"Oh. Sorry. It's like comparing a human to a sparrow. The former is a lot smarter and can think deeply on everything. The latter is... not as smart, but can still do stuff that humans can't do such as taking flight. Do you understand my meaning?"

His wife slowly nodded. "I understand the analogy. Humans are superior organisms in any way because of our sentience and our ability for complex thinking, but a small bird can also be decent as long as it sticks to its job and no further."

"The Neo Amadeus is like that, but instead of functioning like a sparrow, it is specialized in functioning like a multi-armed swordsman mech. Even so, the absence of any deliberate design elements has caused it to become a limited and stunted living mech. It isn't able to grow naturally like my own mechs and relies entirely on an ace pilot's strong willpower to force it to mature."

It was a completely alternate path to creating living mechs that resulted in considerably worse outcomes than with his own living mechs.

"What order of living mech does the Neo Amadeus fit into?" Gloriana asked.

"The Neo Amadeus is such a strange and limited living mech that it doesn't really fit in my existing theoretical framework." Ves answered with a frown. "I guess it is comparable to a first order living mech in strength and capabilities, but even then I am reluctant to label it as such. I will probably have to go back and expand my theory by creating alternate categories to describe mechs like these."

If Ves was willing to be less kind in his phrasing, then he would have classified the Neo Amadeus as a stunted living mech.

If the living mechs of his own making were comparable to ordinary humans, then the Neo Amadeus was more like an uneducated dwarven mining slave from a dirty planet like Desala X in the past!

Now that Ves satisfied his curiosity, he no longer spent any time on this topic. There were plenty of other areas of interest that attracted his attention.

Master Benedict had already noticed the arrival of his guests. He stopped his examinations and flew towards the two Larkinson mech designers.

"Ves. Gloriana. You've arrived."

"Good day.."

"I'm sure you are eager to secure your share of the loot, isn't that right, Ves?"

"You know me too well, Benedict."

"Well, let us not delay any further. I have taken the liberty to put the cockpit of the Neo Amadeus under stasis to preserve whatever is inside."

"Your workshop is equipped with a stasis device?"

Master Benedict smiled. "Stasis technology can provide a great amount of convenience in specific situations. Let me bring you closer so that you can take a look."

While Ves looked incredibly eager to examine the ejected cockpit that Patriarch Reginald had brought back, his wife was less than enthused by the prospect.

She only had to entertain a single thought about the gruesome mess that she might encounter to quell her desire to take a look in person.

"Can I stay here and examine the frame of the Neo Amadeus by myself?" She politely asked. "No offense, but whatever the two of you have in mind is not related to my work and specialty."

Master Benedict nodded. "Please feel free to use the scanning facilities of my workshop."

While Gloriana remained behind in order to take a closer look at the main body of the Neo Amadeus, the other two mech designers moved to the other side of the workshop where the cockpit rested inside a protected enclosure.

"Can you sense him?" The Master Mech Designer curiously asked.

"I could already feel him before I entered this workshop. His willpower is a lot weaker than that of Patriarch Reginald, but it is remarkable how much strength and coherence he is able to retain under these circumstances. Are you sure he is dead?"

"You can take a look at his condition to see for yourself."

Ves did so. His armored form slowly approached the cockpit that was put under stasis.

Since the Mars previously ran the entire cockpit through with its large and broad Whale-Cutting Saber, the cockpit gained two large holes through its sides.

Ves was easily able to peer through one of these holes. He could still see a bloody and broken mess of a body.

The entire lower body of the ace pilot was simply gone due to getting struck by the massive mech saber of the Mars.

The upper body along with one of the arms were still recognizable, but none of them endured the massive trauma without serious signs of damage.

Exposure to space along with other damaging influences had seriously deteriorated the body that was only partially protected by the remains of Jeremiah's high-end piloting suit.

Fortunately for both Ves and Master Benedict, the head of the ace pilot was still reasonably intact. Patriarch Reginald had indeed shown a good amount of care when he attacked the cockpit during the last battle.

"So what do you think now that you have glimpsed his body for yourself, Ves?"

"Saint Jeremiah... isn't entirely dead." Ves slowly said. "He may have suffered a physiological death, but his extraordinary willpower hasn't weakened to the

same degree. I have always considered ace pilots and other comparable lives as different kinds of energy-based life forms. I think that Jeremiah's ability to maintain the cohesion of his spirit under such extreme circumstances lends a lot of credibility to my theory."

Master Benedict didn't look too surprised. "I can understand why you would draw that conclusion. This is your field of expertise more than anything else, but from what I know about ace pilots, they become increasingly more inhuman the more they develop."

Ves was relieved that there was still plenty for him to salvage from the cockpit of the Neo Amadeus. The stasis effect helped a lot in this regard.

He lifted up a P-stone that he had reserved for this occasion. "I would like to secure my loot. Can I proceed with my retrieval process?"

"You can go ahead, Ves. Do you need me to deactivate the stasis effect?"

"That shouldn't be necessary. It will only hasten Jeremiah's deterioration, I think."

Ves carefully reached out to the weakened spirituality of Saint Jeremiah, only to get to smacked by the ace pilot's powerful remnant will!

"Ouch!"

The hostility from the Gauger ace pilot was as clear as day. There was no way that Jeremiah or whatever was left of him wanted to cooperate with the people responsible for his demise!

"This... is going to be a challenge." Ves furrowed his brows.

How could he coax the spirit of an unwilling ace pilot out of the man's own head?

### **Chapter 4335 'Alive'**

Ves felt like he was trying to coax a rebellious kid out of his bedroom.

The difficulty of trying to dislodge Saint Jeremiah's remaining spirit from his dead and frozen body was much greater than he expected.

"Sure enough." He spoke as he continually exerted his own Spirituality. "Ace pilots are incomparably stronger than expert pilots. If I was dealing with the body of the latter, then I would have been able to obtain what I wanted in a matter of seconds."

Ves gained a much deeper comprehension of what made ace pilots special now that he was wrestling with the intangible remains of a recently deceased Saint.

Though Ves was able to meet with Patriarch Reginald Cross in person from time to time, he would have to be suicidal if he ever attempted to lock horns with the Cross Patriarch's domineering force of will!

People like Reginald weren't called Saints for nothing. They possessed their own dignity and their incredible strength gave them capital to be treated as a higher form of humans.

This was one of the reasons why he looked forward to this visit. The chance to bump into the spiritual remains of an enemy ace pilot was a priceless opportunity for him to perform detailed examinations and experiments on an actual Saint!

If other people would see Ves now, they would probably condemn him in the strongest terms for desecrating the remains of an honored and revered figure.

Hardly anyone thought it was permissible to torture and experiment on ace pilots regardless whether they were alive or dead!

Fortunately, neither Patriarch Reginald nor Master Benedict cared that much about silly morality.

As long as Ves didn't profane the remains of Lord Hemmington Cross himself, the Cross Clan was fine with anything else!

It was rather convenient that Patriarch Reginald was currently deployed on the surface of Pima Prime.

It also helped that Master Benedict's hands weren't exactly clean.

Ves had no worries about doing what he set out to do with Saint Jeremiah's spiritual remains.

Seeing that whatever was left of the ace pilot remained far too strong and stubborn to leave its longstanding home, Ves figured that he needed to employ more drastic measures to secure his loot.

"Are you having problems, Ves?" Master Benedict asked in a gentle tone.

Ves filled up his mouth with air and blew it out in an exasperated manner.

"My current operation is not going as smoothly as I wished. I need to resort to another solution."

"What do you have in mind?"

"There are two possible ways for me to proceed. I either need to open up the skull and retrieve Saint Jeremiah's brain, or I need to send out one of my cats."

Master Benedict grew speechless for a moment. He could understand the logic of the former option, but the latter one sounded completely unrelated to the problem at hand!

"To be honest, I would prefer it if you don't take away the brain." The Master Mech Designer said. "It has great research value. Not only that, the MTA will come to recover the body sooner or later. It would be rather inconvenient for me to explain why it is missing a brain."



Ves knew quite well why the MTA wanted to retrieve the brain of an ace pilot. The mechers must have already made plans as soon as Saint Jeremiah fell in battle.

To be honest, trying to take away Saint Jeremiah's remnant spirituality was a risky move. He did not know how important it was to preserve this part of the ace pilot to the mechers. Perhaps whatever plans they formed for the brain might get ruined due to the absence of a critical element.

That did not stop Ves from taking action, though. If Patriarch Reginald dared to claim Jeremiah's skull for himself, then it should be fine to take out a bit extra, right?

If the mechers disapproved of Ves' actions, then they should just come and warn him not to touch an ace spirit's spiritual remnant next time.

Though Ves felt it would be a lot more convenient if he could just take out Jeremiah's brain and put it into a special cultivation tank to preserve its biological state as best as possible, he did not want to generate too much controversy with his actions.

His own clansmen would definitely condemn him if they found out what he had done!

"I will take more direct action, then." Ves spoke. "I've never had my cat challenge an ace pilot directly. This will be an illuminating confrontation. Get out, Blinky!"

Mrow!

A furry purple companion spirit squeezed out of Ves' head. The light trials coursing across his body had grown a lot more vigorous by this time, showing that the spiritual cat had recovered from his previous exertion to a large extent.

Though Blinky's condition had yet to return to its peak, the cat still ought to be able to tackle this latest challenge.

Ves stroked his companion spirit's head for a few seconds.

"Well, Blinky? Are you ready to drag Jerry's spirit out of its broken body?"

Mrow...

"Don't sound so timid. I know you can do it. You are a cat that is born to harness energy. The spiritual remains of an ace pilot is not much different from that of a dark god. There is just a lot of willpower infused in Jeremiah's spirit that makes it extra tough. If not for the fact that he has died, it would have been impossible for you to do anything. Let's hope that our target has weakened enough for you to be able to gain the upper hand."

Blinky steadily flew towards the cockpit in stasis. The more the companion spirit Jeremiah's broken body, the greater he experienced the oppressive willpower from the deceased ace pilot.

Even in death, Jeremiah still hadn't completely died!

Though Ves was rather certain that the former Saint was no longer awake or aware was going on, the man's remnant spirituality still possessed such a strong instinct to defend itself and repel foreign influences that Blinky rapidly encountered increasing resistance!

Mrow! Mrow!

It was like trying to approach a burning star. Blinky's progress slowed as the ace pilot's remnant willpower condensed into a weakened version of a domain field that caused the companion spirit to feel as if he had entered a dense minefield!

Ves was able to experience all of this first-hand as Blinky was essentially another side of himself.

Seeing that Blinky couldn't proceed any further at this point, he finally made a decisive decision.

"Take action."

Mrow!

Blinky no longer acted gentle this time. The cat began to suck in ambient spiritual energy and even a bit of willpower.

Though it was incredibly difficult for the companion spirit to absorb and digest this foreign matter, the fact that Jeremiah was already dead for the most part made it a lot more possible to affect whatever was left!

Slowly but surely, Blinky drew out more energies and began to pass it on to the P-stone that Ves had prepared.

This was the companion spirit's unique ability. The Unending One's devouring ability was so powerful and comprehensive that not even Jeremiah's remnant spirituality and willpower could resist this power!

As this process continued, Jeremiah's willpower continued to weaken and lose strength at a steady rate.

Perhaps it might have been able to put up a better fight against Blinky if it was conscious, but this was not the case.

Soon enough, the resistance had weakened to the point where Blinky could finally move closer without encountering any powerful blockades.

Though Ves lamented the fact that he had been forced to cripple Jeremiah's spiritual remnant a bit more than he would have liked, he also felt it was better to neutralize a hidden danger in advance.

After all, if he tried to preserve Jeremiah's spiritual remnant as completely as possible, who knew whether the ace pilot might actually regain consciousness and begin to stir up trouble!

Right now, Blinky had cut away so much energy from Jeremiah's spiritual remnant that the P-stone was currently filled with the former ace pilot's powerful aura.

"Luckily, I made sure to bring an extra."

Ves set aside the P-stone and brought out another one that was ready to be filled.

This time, Blinky no longer damaged Jeremiah's spirituality any further, but instead attempted to dislodge it from the ace pilot's body!

Though the resistance was still great, Blinky was so good in this aspect that he eventually succeeded in pulling out Jeremiah's weakened will and spirit!

The cat quickly dragged his booty to the second P-stone and completed his mission.

"Good job, Blinky. I knew you could do it. Take a rest."

Mrow mrow.

Blinky dove back into Ves' head, thereby concluding this important event.

Ves gazed appreciatively at his two P-stones. Though it was rather weird for him to split up Saint Jeremiah's spiritual remnant into two, he felt this was a good way to disarm what would otherwise be a powerful hostile entity.

He carefully set the two P-stones aside, making sure they were placed far away enough to prevent them from interacting with each other.

He already made a plan to store the second P-stone in his B-stone lockbox as soon as he returned to his own ship.

Seeing that Ves was done with claiming his share of the loot, Master Benedict moved to another section of the workshop.

"Come. There is something else that I want you to see. I believe it is of great professional interest to a mech designer like yourself."

Ves grew curious as he followed the Master Mech Designer for a while.

The two eventually reached a large weapon rack where the Crossers had mounted a familiar-looking sword.

"Is that... the plasma sword used by the Neo Amadeus?"

"Correct." Master Benedict let out a soft snort. "It's not an average sword. As one of the three primary armaments of an ace mech, the tech and material composition of this weapon are both luxurious and well-designed. This is a weapon worthy of a Saint."

There was no way for Ves to hide his appreciation for this high-tech weapon. Perhaps Ketis would squeal out loud if she was able to get in touch with this priceless piece of equipment.

The plasma sword was not only an exquisite technological product, but it had also been baptized by Saint Jeremiah's willpower for at least several years.

This changed and enhanced the weapon in ways that were difficult to describe.

Even now, pieces of Jeremiah's spirit and willpower still clung to the weapon. Ves was tempted to send out Blinky in order to decontaminate the precious plasma weapon, but he thought better of it a moment later.

There was no need to act in a hurry. Cleansing the weapon might cause it to devolve back to its original state.

Ves quickly recalled an interesting aspect about the three main swords of the Neo Amadeus.

His eyes widened a bit as he turned his gaze and his spiritual senses towards the hilt of the high-tech weapon.

Deep inside the body of the large mech-scaled weapon, Ves was able to sense a weak but distinct human presence that gave the plasma sword a different vibe!

Master Benedict wordlessly activated a projection that displayed a deep scan of the plasma sword's interior.

The insides of the swords contained all of the complicated internal components that were needed to make a plasma sword work.

However, at the place where Ves was able to sense another mind, the scan results clearly displayed a highly reinforced pocket where the head of an actual person was actually being kept alive!

The surprising part of all of this was that despite all of the knocks that the plasma sword had suffered over the course of the previous battle, the decapitated head of an unknown expert pilot was still alive!

"This..."

Master Benedict crossed his arms. "Can't you see, Ves? Just as you have been busy with trying to rip off other people's design solutions, a certain Master Mech Designer from the Gauge Dynasty has been attempting to imitate your living mechs. As crazy as this plasma sword looks, it is perhaps the closest and most successful attempt to reconstruct your work up to this point. It is quite literally a living sword."

"...If this is a living sword, then I'm a Star Designer."

#### **Chapter 4336 Targeted**

"So this is what other people call a living sword, huh?"

Ves did not look impressed at all. He was bewildered more than anything.

As Ves and Master Benedict Cortez studied the scanning data of the plasma sword, they found it was a well-designed product of high technology.

Though the principles of plasma technology were rather clear, it was not that easy to weaponize it in a way to make it functional in mech combat.

Plasma was hot. It could melt through all kinds of alloys if it was applied to a target long enough, but no mech pilot was stupid enough to allow a plasma blade to melt through his mech with impunity.

Therefore, plasma blades needed to possess a high degree of output, but that introduced all kinds of technical challenges.

How to maximize output, how to prevent the internals from frying, how to manage the extreme heat generation and how to stuff it all in a package that was small enough to be usable in mech combat were all requirements that had to be met in order to make a plasma weapon viable in a combat setting.

The high thresholds of military plasma technology ultimately meant that it was mostly common in first-class mechs.

Though it was definitely possible to equip second-class mechs with plasma weapons if the client was willing to commit more funding and resources, it simply didn't make sense most of the time.

The Neo Amadeus was different. As an ace mech, its design budget was so high that previously unattainable technology became a lot more viable all of a sudden.

Ves was not surprised at all that the Gauge Dynasty was willing to invest in a plasma sword as well as other weapons such as an anti-resonance sword and a transphasic sword for a new ace mech.

Saint Jeremiah Gauge definitely possessed the strength to make good use of these armaments!

The leadership of the dynasty must feel extremely pained right now. Not only did they lose a relatively young ace pilot that could have gone on to guard the

Gaugers for at least a century, but they also lost all of the investment they poured into the development of an ace mech that only participated in one actual battle.

The estimated production cost of the Neo Amadeus and all of its armaments definitely amounted to millions of MTA credits!

Ves wouldn't be surprised if the total cost, which included the amount of hours that Master Mech Designers and other personnel worked on the design project, exceeded 10 million MTA credits!

No other kind of second-class mech could come close to this extravagance. Spending at this level was mostly associated with first-class mechs more than anything.

Now, all of this value had fallen into the hands of the Cross Clan. Master Benedict would probably be able to derive an enormous amount of gains from studying the frame of the Neo Amadeus.

Even though he was largely responsible for designing the initial version of the Mars and upgrading it to ace mech standards, it was undeniable that he wasn't exactly the most qualified person to fulfill these responsibilities.

The former Skull Architect only realized his design philosophy a few years ago and could still be considered a baby among Master Mech Designers.

This meant that there were huge and profound differences between the Mars and the Neo Amadeus.

Though the former actually possessed more phasewater and high-grade exotics than the latter, Ves actually found that the Neo Amadeus possessed a clear and decisive edge in technological sophistication.

This should not be a surprise.



Several Masters contributed to its design, and the famed Multi-Armed Designer himself led the design project.

Not only that, but the Gauge Dynasty was able to mobilize its best and most accomplished R&D institutions to develop all kinds of custom high-end mech parts and mech systems for the ace mech, making it so that nothing about its design consisted of stock components.

Though Ves hadn't been able to study the frame of the Neo Amadeus in detail as of yet, its plasma sword ought to be a good representation of the entire package.

Master Benedict grew curious at what the younger mech designer could pick up from the plasma sword.

"Leaving aside the abnormally hidden deep within the structure of this weapon, what is your impression of the overall design style and direction of the plasma sword?"

Ves understood that this was probably a teaching moment. He did not mind being patronized because his experience with design work at this level was severely deficient.

A former Fridayman mech designer and newly-advanced Master most certainly knew more how works like the Neo Amadeus and its luxurious equipment came about!

Since Ves did not want to sound too incompetent, he took his time to evaluate the plasma sword and formulate a proper answer.

"The sword is... a collaborative work." Ves spoke as he drew from his own experiences. "I can tell that someone with a good understanding of swords and swordsman mechs took charge of the design of this weapon. Every aspect about the design lines up with a single and coherent design concept. Though its performance is incredibly high, it is not extreme to the point of

compromising its robustness and structural integrity. It is truly a powerful and reliable plasma sword that won't easily malfunction during ace mech combat, and that is the most important requirement."

Fragile products had no place in ace mechs. Saints pushed their machines harder than any expert pilot by a huge margin. This pretty much made it impossible to equip halfgods with cheap and shambling ace mechs.

"Do you think it is a good weapon?"

Ves shrugged. "I'm sure the Multi-Armed Designer wouldn't have allowed it to exist if it didn't complement Saint Jeremiah and the Neo Amadeus. The existence of this weapon provides the Neo Amadeus with the crucial capability to deal thermal energy damage, thereby adding more diversity to the ace mech's damage profile. The only major shortcoming is that this plasma sword is a power hog. It can't be utilized for longer periods of time because the burden to its energy reserves is just too big."

"Are you suggesting that the plasma sword is incongruous to the total package?"

"It is fine if it is regarded as a contingency option." Ves answered. "The cost of using it is too high under normal circumstances, so there is no reason for Saint Jeremiah to employ it unless he encounters an enemy that is highly resistant to physical damage or has used up his other two swords, which was the case during the previous duel."

Master Benedict nodded in agreement. "Those are my thoughts as well. The plasma sword is a luxury option. Its inclusion means that the Gauge Dynasty has spent rather generously to equip the Neo Amadeus with the weapons it needs to tackle both human and alien threats. Now, what do you make of its abnormal feature?"

The design of the plasma sword was completely logical and in harmony aside from only one glaring addition.

Ves turned his gaze back to the secret chamber that had been built inside the weapon.

"This 'thing' looks like it was jammed into the plasma sword after it was already designed. There are clear signs that the designers had to resize and shift around a lot of components in order to make room for this last-minute demand. While the people who worked on the design have done an excellent job in integrating this chamber without sacrificing too much performance, there is still a clear incongruity in design style and intention."

Master Benedict smirked. "Do you think it is worth it for the Gaugers to jam this extra element into the plasma sword? After all, it was only added to the weapon during a later phase of the design process. Mech designers ordinarily try to avoid feature creep as much as possible."

This was the tricky part about the abnormality. Ves didn't think that Saint Jeremiah Gauge requested such a change. It was simply too macabre to be associated with an ace pilot who developed a reputation for being noble and upright.

"It depends on who is in charge and who is setting the goals." Ves eventually said. "Normally, the ace pilot should be the person that ultimately dictates what should be put into his machine. The lead designer is the person responsible for translating the demands of the ace pilot into concrete design work. However, this weird attempt to turn the plasma sword into a living weapon looks like it is an attempt to perform an experiment. If I didn't know any better, then I would have accused Master Toqueman Huron for misusing the Neo Amadeus for his own ends. He has coopted his design to pursue his personal goals and ambitions."

Master Benedict sighed and shook his head.

"You think too simply, Ves. Ace mechs are literally life savers to a state. The Gauge Dynasty is only capable of fielding an extremely limited amount of these powerful machines, so the design of each of them is subject to rigorous political oversight in order to ensure that none of them are found wanting."

Ves furrowed his eyebrows. "Too much meddling from leaders rarely leads to good results. Don't those Gaugers know their actions are counterproductive?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. Whatever the case, it is impossible for Master Huron to fool around with the design of the Neo Amadeus. For him to be able to make this drastic change to not just the plasma sword but also the other two main armaments of the ace mech means that he has most definitely convinced the leaders of the Gauge Dynasty to allow this experiment to proceed. This is an exceptional result considering how radical and unorthodox it is to insert the decapitated head of a living expert pilot inside a mech sword."

Ves finally realized how unusual it was for such an abnormality to exist.

"Wait a minute... what about the MTA? Isn't it taboo to desecrate expert pilots by using them as test subjects in sick human experiments? Why haven't the mechers arrested Master Huron and worked harder to prevent this travesty from happening?"

Didn't the older man standing next to Ves get in trouble in the past because he committed a comparable crime in the past?

Master Benedict remained silent for a few seconds.

"I have a theory on that, but I think that you can deduce one as well. You know what has happened. You know that the MTA apparently hasn't sanctioned Master Huron despite knowing that he is responsible for conducting an egregious form of human experimentation. What does that tell you, Ves?"

Numerous thoughts began to well up in Ves' mind. Many of them could stir a lot of controversy and condemnation if he tried to publicize his ideas.

"It tells me that... the MTA or a faction of it is likely complicit in this taboo experiment." Ves ultimately concluded. "The MTA monitors everything and there is no way the Association would miss the fact that the Fridaymen committed this act not once, but thrice. Three different expert pilots have lived a tortured life while locked inside the massive structure of different ace mech weapons. The only explanation that makes sense is that Master Huron has either received the active support of a powerful MTA faction or that he has been permitted to conduct his experiment with the implicit approval of a bunch of bigwigs in the MTA."

"Why would the mechers support this experiment or permit it from happening?"

Ves frowned deeper as a number of unsettling answers came to mind.

"Because... there is at least one group of mechers that may be jealous at my living mechs. So far, I enjoy a monopoly on living mechs. It is becoming increasingly more known that my contributions to the mech industry are extremely helpful. My best commercial offerings have become the market leaders in their respective categories. The competition is bound to hate my work. The only ways to cope with my increasing success is to ban my work or find a way to develop a superior alternative to the value proposition of my specialty."

"In other words, Master Huron is but the first among many mech designers who are seeking to replace 'your' living mechs with their own versions. That is probably not a surprise to you. What is truly important this time is that we have obtained proof that those mech designers are pursuing their goal with the implicit or explicit approval of a portion of the MTA. That is much more significant news."

Ves understood exactly how scary it was to receive so much 'care' and 'attention' from the MTA!

He was being targeted!

### **Chapter 4337 Heightened Attention**

"As a mech designer who is now subject to special treatment from your competitors as well as others who are interested in replicating your design philosophy, how do you feel at this moment?"

"I... don't know. I feel awfully mixed, to say the least. A part of me is honored that my work is valued to this degree by some of the most authoritative groups of the mech industry. Another part of me is afraid that I am being targeted by people in power. Then there is a part of me that is horrified that a Master Mech Designer dares to experiment on expert pilots and that the MTA has actually allowed this to happen. The existence of this mech sword clearly violates the rules the Association has set on the treatment of high-ranking mech pilots."

"Those are dangerous words, Ves." Master Benedict said, though his smirk showed that he didn't really take them seriously either. "Master Huron and his backers have probably prepared reasonable excuses and rationalizations to explain what they have done to those that may be concerned about this experiment, but that is not really that important. What matters is that there is a more systematic attempt to deconstruct, reverse engineer, imitate or replace your design philosophy. What is your response to this development?"

"...I don't think I can do anything about it." Ves sighed. "I mean, the MTA is on it, right? As the ultimate authorities of the mech industry, there is no way a small figure like myself can fight against it. Besides, I don't think a design application as gruesome as this can ever achieve mainstream success. The MTA would be fools to standardize the practice of cutting off the heads of

expert pilots and integrating them into mechs. At least in your case you don't need the high-ranking mech pilots to be alive when you harvest their skulls."

"Let's focus on the MTA for a moment. What do you think? Do you think the mechers are treating you unfairly?"

Ves simply shrugged. "As I've alluded to earlier, my bargaining power is too small for me to affect the decisions of the Association. I'm not that surprised that the mechers are willing to violate their own rules in order to advance their own interests. It is their prerogative to do so considering that they hold all of the power. I just find it questionable whether it is worthwhile for them to make an exception to the rules to make a plasma sword like this. I'm sure its original design was already sufficient for Saint Jeremiah Gauge. Why take this unnecessary step? From what I have observed in the earlier battle, the so-called living swords did not grant the Neo Amadeus a drastic improvement in combat effectiveness."

To be fair, it was difficult to judge how much the living aspect enhanced the performance of the Neo Amadeus when there were no clear comparisons available. This was a familiar problem with many innovations, and one that plagued Ves as well over the course of his career.

Master Benedict crossed his arms. "When it comes to experiments, achieving good results is not necessarily the only goal. The process is also important, and so are the discoveries made along the way. This is only an initial and extremely rough attempt at replicating the phenomenon known as living mechs. The reasons why the heads of expert pilots are used this time is because their strength is high, which makes it a lot easier to gather clear and distinct data. Subsequent experiments may be a lot less controversial. For example, Master Huron might employ heads taken from regular people or even clones that were grown in labs."

This was an established approach in the research sector. At the start, an inventor might not even know whether his radical new idea even worked. His goal at this stage was to prove his new concept, and to do that he needed to employ the best materials he could obtain in order to produce the strongest and most unambiguous results.

Just as with the plasma sword, other goals weren't as important. There was no need to focus on making the implementation as practical, cost-effective and in line with ethics at this early stage.

All of these improvements could come later, but only after the researcher was able to prove the validity of his theories.

Ves narrowed his eyes as he tried to dig deeper into how the plasma sword's unusual feature affected its combat power.

"Even if this is just a test balloon, it is an extreme one. I really don't know what the people from the MTA are thinking by letting this lunacy happen in the first place. I've heard that some of the factions of the MTA are more radical and obsessive than others, but I don't think that the Mech Supremacy Faction is so desperate that it is even willing to permit such an act."

Master Benedict held a different opinion.

"Hahaha. Your understanding of how the MTA works is not extensive enough."

"What do you mean by that, Master?"

The older man sneered. "I wouldn't be surprised if the Survivalists or the Transhumanists are involved in this operation. Their motivations to understand and crack your specialty are greater than normal because they possessed the greatest understanding of the potential of your work."



"What?! They wouldn't! I'm already cooperating with them! I have shared plenty of my trade secrets with them. The two factions only need to sit back and relax while I feed them with regular updates on my research progress. Why would they want to go behind my back and mess around with bootleg versions of living mechs?"

"There are many possible reasons why your supposed friends and backers might want to conduct their own research in your fields." Benedict answered. "For example, they may be concerned about whether you will remain available long enough to supply them with your research results. If you happen to die during the Trailblazer Expedition, how will living mechs continue to be developed? If you go crazy one day and shift your design philosophy in a completely different direction, how will the supporters of living mechs within the MTA be able to proceed?"

Ves began to understand what Master Benedict was trying to convey. "I see..."

"It makes a lot of sense to increase redundancy and perform additional research in the new and promising field you have opened up. The fact that living mechs are so dependent on a single point of failure is bad practice. Don't forget what kind of organization the MTA truly is. The advancement of technology, especially in relation to mechs, trumps everything else. Rules and morality take a backseat when progress is at stake."

That indeed fell in line with Ves' own impression of the MTA. His expression became more thoughtful at this time.

"Strangely enough, I don't feel as bothered with this treatment as before." He said.

"Why the change?"

Ves smirked. "If the MTA cares so much about living mechs that it is willing to encourage or allow additional research in my own field, then that is a sign that I am finally beginning to fulfill my grand vision of the mech industry. One of the goals that I am pursuing is to turn living mechs into the new status quo of the mech community. It is a lot easier to make them ubiquitous when the Association itself puts its entire institutional weight behind my work."

Master Benedict knocked Ves' chestplate with his own covered fist. "Don't get too conceited. You're still a Journeyman. You are too young and junior to bear this weight. Have you forgotten about the power balance we talked about earlier? You do not have much leverage. The MTA can favor your work in one day and prohibit it the next day. It can also impose a lot of additional rules or demands that make it much harder for you to do what you want."

That was indeed a great concern to Ves. For now, the MTA had been remarkably generous towards him. The mechers did not impose too many burdens on him and generally allowed him to design all kinds of living mechs, even ones that had the potential to change and disrupt existing human society.

His most successful commercial products such as the Ferocious Piranha line, the Pacifier line, the War Squire line, the Hymenoptera line and so on already introduced drastic changes to society in a considerable part of the Red Ocean.

If Ves continued to progress his design philosophy, he could impact human society so much that he could easily amass influence comparable to that of Master Termaneo Dervidian!

However, the problem with that was that the MTA or at least parts of it might not necessarily want Ves to gain such a voice in human society.

The greater his weight in society, the greater his threat towards certain interest groups.

All of these complicated matters were too heavy for Ves. Though he didn't want to spare any thought on them, the reality of the situation left him with little choice. The existence of the abnormal plasma sword served as a warning to him that other people were almost certainly plotting around him no matter whether he was cooperative or not. It would be foolish for him to go back to burying his head in the sand.

He turned towards the older man. Just like the unknown mechers that supported Master Huron's research, Master Benedict most definitely had his own agenda. It wasn't a coincidence that he brought this topic and steered it in this specific direction.

"What do you think I should do, Benedict?" He asked with a hint of suspicion.

"Relax, Ves. I have my own ambitions. I am merely concerned as a friend of yours. My experience with the MTA is richer than yours. Though I have never received so much favor and attention from the mechers as you, I have a deeper comprehension of the pitfalls of dealing with them. My personal experiences along with my discussions with fellow colleagues has taught me that 'indigenous' mech designers such as you and I operate on the whims of the Association."

Ves did not look impressed. "You're not saying anything new."

"I wasn't finished, Ves. You need to look beyond the surface and think about the implications of what I have said. What I mean by that statement is that you need to put more effort into navigating the web of interests within the MTA. It is best if the mechers think so little of your work that they will ignore you just like they ignore most mech designers. That is clearly not the case, though. You have already caught their attention. This means that the only way for you

to go forward is to actively cultivate a friendship and alliance with a strong backer within the MTA."

"I've already done that, Benedict. I impressed the Survivalists and the Transhumanists and received their backing and protection in return."

"Those relationships are too shallow." The Master Mech Designer shook his head in disapproval. "Take this plasma sword for example. In truth, you are correct that it is unlikely that the two factions would approve of this experiment. However, they are not as monolithic as you think. Every MTA faction is divided into many powerful individuals and interest groups. Only one notable Master Mech Designer or Star Designer can start an initiative like this without needing to obtain the approval of the rest of a faction."

"So Master Huron was allowed to do what he wished because he obtained the favor of a single bigshot?"

Master Benedict nodded. "That is correct. As long as the consequences aren't too big, it is possible for powerful individuals within the MTA to pursue their own initiatives. If you want to go further with trying to protect your rights and further your goal of popularizing living mechs, then you will need to develop a close friendship with a powerful figure within the Association. It is not enough to be on good terms with the two factions that you are already associated with. The absence of deep commitments mean that the Survivalists and the Transhumanists can always turn their backs on you from the moment your usefulness has come to an end."

"I... see..."

### **Chapter 4338 Super Ingredient**

Though Master Benedict no longer continued this discussion any further, Ves still had plenty of food for thought.

Unlike Gloriana, he could hardly focus on examining the Neo Amadeus and its various pieces of high-end equipment due to all of the turbulent thoughts running through his mind.

Ves understood that he had made enough progress and produced enough results in the Red Ocean to move into the big leagues of the mech community.

Though his status as a Journeyman caused many people up high to dismiss his presence, that did not stop the more discerning people from taking him seriously.

As Master Benedict just said, the power imbalance was too great for Ves to feel secure. Anything could happen to him as his work began to make more changes to society.

Some people stood to benefit from the popularization of living mechs while others would definitely lose business.

Instead of waiting until a greater and more damaging event occurred in the future, Ves needed to preempt these risks.

The way to do that was to build up more leverage and support by developing a close relationship with a mecher that was powerful enough to cover for him but also friendly enough to take risks on his behalf.

As Ves thought of possible candidates that he could get closer with, he found out that the list of people he might be able to depend upon wasn't great.

He was certain that the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction encompassed a huge amount of people, including a huge amount of powerful Masters and numerous Star Designers.

Yet just because their factions supported Ves didn't mean that they would stick up for him during the bad times.

This was what Master Benedict was truly warning him about. Ves had never met the vast majority of Survivalists and Transhumanists and could not possibly count on them to cover his back if he needed their help.

The only people he could truly count upon were those he spoke to in person and developed a positive impression on him. What Ves needed to do was to increase his value in their eyes and build a more reliable relationship with them. It was best to forge a true partnership with them just like the one he formed with Calabast.

The amount of people from the MTA that Ves could approach was awfully short.

He had built up a great relationship with Master Willix in the past, but the huge distance between them had cooled their friendship as the years continued to pass by. Ves did not dare to assume that Moira Willix would stick up to him when they hadn't spoken with each other for more than five years.

Master Termaneo Dervidian was a better target. Ves had sporadic contact with him as the prestigious Master possessed a clear interest in his work. Yet the talks between the two mostly amounted to Ves updating his contact person from the Transhumanist Faction of his latest research results.

This was not enough anymore. If Ves wanted to turn Master Dervidian into a more reliable backer, then he needed to expand his talks with the busy MTA mech designer.

However, the difficulty of doing this was too great. Even if Master Dervidian favored Ves, that didn't necessarily mean that this man who only submitted to Star Designers would sincerely interact with a little punk!

The difference in status between the two were simply too great for Ves to have much confidence.

If Ves wanted to make more progress, then he needed to approach someone who was not as distant and aloof.

The problem with that was that anyone weaker than Master Dervidian might not necessarily have the pull within the MTA to provide him with the cover that he sought.

"The closest person that comes to mind is Jovy Armalon."

Ves smiled a bit as he thought about his first real friend within the MTA. Though they had never met each other in the last five years, they still got in touch from time to time.

In fact, their friendship should have already passed a point where Jovy would be glad to assist Ves in dealing with potential trouble.

"He's still too young, though." Ves sighed.

Jovy was a great friend, but his influence within the MTA was too marginal. His value was almost entirely based on his potential rather than his accomplishments so far. Until he was able to realize his design philosophy and prove that he had the capability to throw his weight around, there was little that he could do to affect the MTA's trends.

The most that Jovy could do was ask for help from his own backing to help Ves out. He had already done that a few times, but there was a limit to how many favors he could cash in at a time.

"Damnit." Ves frowned. "It's still not enough. I need to approach other people, preferably ones like my wife that clearly benefit from my work."

"What did you say, Ves?" Gloriana looked up from her data screen as she heard him mention her name.

"Ah, it's nothing, honey."

Ves slowly floated over to Gloriana's position.

At this time, his wife was hovering over the derelict frame of the Neo Amadeus. Despite missing its cockpit, the overall damage to its frame was fairly light. This granted her plenty of insights about the design work of famed Gauger mech designers such as Master Huron and the Multi-Armed Designer.

"What do you think of the Neo Amadeus?"

"There is so much about this ace mech that is wonderful that I don't even know where to begin." Gloriana gasped. "I have to admit that the Masters of the Gauge Dynasty truly deserve their reputation. The way they developed and integrated all of these advanced components is almost perfect. I have discovered so many new methods and design solutions that I could spend years on studying them all. To be honest, it is too premature for me to study a mech as high-end as this. I understand to a better degree why such work is usually left to Masters."

As Ves took a look at the Neo Amadeus from above, he could feel the lingering influences that Saint Jeremiah's strong willpower had imparted to the frame.

As an ace swordsman mech, the wreck gave off a vibe that vaguely reminded Ves of Ketis' distinctive mech designs.

"Ketis should come and see this. She can probably provide a lot of insights from the perspective of a swordswoman." Ves noted.

"She will have plenty of time to do that once our fleet has left the Friday Colonies."

Both Ves and Gloriana began to take a closer look at specific aspects of the Neo Amadeus.

Anytime they made an interesting observation, they exchanged their thoughts and enriched each other's understanding of the captured ace mech.



"It's a shame that a mech as new, advanced and valuable as this can't be used anymore." Ves spoke with regret. "The passing of Saint Jeremiah means that the Neo Amadeus is no longer able to fulfill its primary job. The only ways for us to make use of it is to study its design, turn it into a trophy or break it down so that we can recycle a portion of its high-grade materials."

"Is that truly the case, Ves?"

"Huh? What do you mean by that?"

"Don't act stupid in front of me." Gloriana turned in his direction. "I paid attention to you when you approached the cockpit of the Neo Amadeus and retrieved an important part of Jeremiah. Be honest with me. Is it possible for you to revive him to an extent and make it possible for a version of him to pilot this ace mech again?"

"What?! Don't be ridiculous, honey. That's impossible! Saint Jeremiah obviously died. The Whale-Cutting Saber ran right through his body!"

"Then what were you doing with your P-stones back then? I've heard some of your theories. I know in part what is going on in your mind by connecting with each other through our design networks. I can guess what you are thinking whenever a devious grin appears on your face. I'm not stupid, you know. Ace pilots are already close to becoming gods. I don't believe that Saint Jeremiah is as dead as everyone thinks he is. I believe with certainty that he can come back alive as long as he has fallen into the right hands. Don't you agree, Ves?"

He couldn't hide the truth from his wife. She knew him far too well.

"Okay, I admit it. I did think about it, but it was just a thought experiment, that was all. As you are already aware, I have developed something of a knack of bringing entities back from the dead in a sense. I have speculated that if I really wanted to, it may be possible to revive Saint Jeremiah by nurturing his

remnant spirituality and willpower while preparing a healthy cloned body for him. I don't know what I will get out of this, but the chances are far too great that I will just bring an irreconcilably hostile enemy back to life. Do you really think it is a good idea to give back a powerful ace pilot back to the Gauge Dynasty and the Friday Coalition?"

"Can't you do anything about it? You're in complete control over his remnant spirit. Why can't you reprogram it so that he can become the ultimate tool in your hands?"

Ves couldn't believe what his wife was saying!

"We can't do that, Gloriana! The entire mech community will kill us if the public learns what we have done. Besides, I don't think it is possible to induce any serious changes to Saint Jeremiah's spirit. It is so deeply intertwined with his willpower that it is unchangeable. The protection is simply too strong for me to manipulate it like I can with other spirits."

Willpower acted like copy protection more or less.

Though Ves hadn't attempted anything, he already theorized that if he tried to make any alterations to Jeremiah's remnant spirituality, the former ace pilot's willpower would either block or lash out when it detected anything that did not look right.

His wife looked disappointed. "So you can't do anything useful with what you have?"

"Well, I need to study the spiritual remnant and perform experiments in order to figure out the answer, but if my guess is right, you shouldn't expect too much from me. Ace pilots are so strong that they can still maintain their dignity after their passing."

That didn't stop Ves from coming up with strange ideas, though. It was not in his nature to abide by common sense. The spiritual ingredients that he had

just salvaged from the cockpit were among the most valuable that he had ever obtained up to this point!

For example, Ves came up with a potential idea after witnessing the stellar performance of the Titan-5 Project.

Despite the fact that the meat suit clearly possessed a hostile and rebellious personality, its combat prowess was incredible. Ves didn't think he could develop a stronger mounted wargear loadout for the Everchanger unless he invested in insanely expensive tech and materials.

If Ves could take the concept that made the meat suit such a unique living product and apply it to a different mech or weapon, he might be able to introduce a brand new category of living mechs!

Ves was tempted to call them devil mechs, as their concept aligned with what he originally had in mind with his Devil Tiger.

Saint Jeremiah's spiritual remnant could play a useful role in this potential research project. Ves could either use it to create a new design spirit, or he could convert it into the spiritual foundation of a supermech of unsurpassed power!

Of course, he didn't think it would be that easy to make use of this super ingredient, but he was willing to give it a try.

### **Chapter 4339 The Quiet Departure**

The raiding finally came to an end.

Pima Prime V had suffered enough.

After plundering, burning and destroying many lucrative city districts of Ardam, the capital city became a shadow of its former self.

The Hex Army behaved more violently towards the proud colony of the Gauge Dynasty than everyone expected.

At times, the Hexer veteran mech pilots recalled how much they fought, bled and suffered over the course of the Komodo War.

The fall of the Hexadric Hegemony and the subsequent abandoning of trillions of Hexer citizens had left a deep and irreparable scar in the hearts of every Hexer soldier.

So few Hexers managed to make it to the Red Ocean that many of them suffered one form of survivor's guilt or another.

Now that they came face to face with the properties and the wealth of the enemies responsible for driving the Hexers away from the old galaxy, many Hexer veterans completely let go of their discipline and their orders and began to lay waste to the surrounding structures!

Too many mech squads deviated from their instructions and wandered off into other districts in order to stomp on houses and demolish monuments dedicated to Fridayman war heroes.

Some Hexer mech pilots had even gone AWOL and wandered off to take revenge against the Fridaymen according to their own ideas.

Suffice to say, the neat and detailed plan to methodically plunder and raze Ardham and other cities on the surface of Pima Prime V eventually devolved into a bit of a mess.

The Hexers wasted so much time on less productive acts that they failed to plunder as much as they intended to at the start.

The uncontrolled outbursts of violence disrupted the raiding operation so much that the Golden Skull Alliance regularly admonished the Hex Army for deviating from their areas.

What was strange was that the Hexer leaders and commanders did not put much effort into reining in their rampaging troops.

General Alisky Victrix offered General Verle a blunt answer.

"Our people need this more than anything." She spoke in her cool but incisive tone over the communication channel. "For over half a decade, our people have resided in the Hex Federation with the cloud of shame and defeat hanging over our heads. We have lost almost everything we cared about when we lost the war. This is the first time that we have been able to prove our strength over the Fridaymen. I am allowing our mech pilots to vent because they have withheld their depression and dishonor for too long. This will be the turning point where our colonial state and people regain their confidence and optimism!"

While the Hexers definitely wanted to strike a heavy blow to the economic interests of the Gauge Dynasty and the Friday Colonies, it was also important for them to heal the mental wounds they incurred from their massive defeat.

In fact, General Alisky Victrix would have been fine with leaving the Pima Prime System immediately after winning the battle because the Hex Federation already fulfilled its real goal as far as it was concerned!

Everything else that came afterwards was just icing on the cake!

Despite the disruptions generated by the Hexers, the Golden Skull Alliance generally obtained what it wanted from the surface.

Pima Prime V was truly a well-developed colony. Not just Ardam, but also many other settlements offered many different goodies that the Gaugers failed to evacuate in time.

Shuttles, transports and larger vessels constantly brought back many containers filled with goods and materials to the fleet in orbit.

Cargo holds became so filled with plunder that space eventually ran out. Civilian ships such as the Discentibus, the Vivacious Wal had to suspend their

usual operations in order to stuff as many containers in any available open spaces such as training grounds and parks.

The plundering spree was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to empty a prosperous human colony of a lot of material wealth!

There was no way the Larkinson Clan wished to show restraint just because there were clansmen who found it more important to maintain enough living space.

In any case, the Golden Skull Alliance did not intend to hang onto all of the loot for long.

Though Ves originally did not intend to return to Davute after making such a big deal of leaving the port system, there was little choice but to go back in order to handle all of the consequences of concluding Operation Saturday Market.

Everyone stuffed their starships full of valuable loot that they hadn't even sorted it all out yet. Priceless treasures may have been mixed with trash without anyone knowing for certain.

The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers also stole a lot of cultural objects and other goods that did not have any obvious price tags. Determining their value would definitely take a lot of time and effort.

Selling all of these items in bulk at the nearest available trading system might be a convenient way to free up enough cargo space, but it was also a great way to miss out on a lot of profit.

After a brief discussion, the leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance simply decided to return to Davute so that they could dump all of their plunder at their local branches. From then on, the branch members could sort out the loot and sell them at the best possible prices over the following months or years.

Besides, returning to Davute also granted the Golden Skull Alliance a good opportunity to replenish their supplies, conduct more specialized repairs and make up for the mechs and starships the alliance partners had lost in battle.

"Goodbye, Pima Prime."

After the last shuttles and transports returned from the surface, the combined fleet moved towards the nearest Lagrange point in the port system.

The Fridaymen who were huddling in the underground shelters or in deep space did not wave the 'visitors' goodbye, though they were definitely pleased to see the scourge depart from their homes!

None of the surviving defenders came to harass or threaten the Hexers and the Golden Skullers.

The invaders had already dismantled far too many Fridayman mechs that the remaining ones simply didn't have the numbers to pose a significant threat.

The Hexers left in space had also made sure to clear the surrounding space and drive away any surviving Fridayman starships that could shadow the combined fleet.

There was no way the Hexers and Golden Skullers left anything to chance. Their patrols even launched warning shots at nosy trade vessels hailing from neutral powers because they strayed too close.

Though there were a lot of people that held their breaths as the massive fleet finally reached the Lagrange point, they finally relaxed and eased the tension in their bones as the starships smoothly transitioned into FTL travel without any interference.

"It's over."

The fleet was safe for now, but people like Ves clearly understood that they were not out of the woods yet. The Friday Colonies encompassed a fairly large amount of space and it was not so easy to get away.

Previously, the combined fleet was able to enter the Friday Colonies and reach Pima Prime fairly quickly because their target happened to be a port system.

This time, the exit route did encompass any port systems. That meant that if the Fridaymen truly desired to take revenge, they could combine their forces and attempt to intercept the departing winners.

"Relax, Ves." Calabast said during a routine meeting. "The chances that we will get intercepted is too low. We have been monitoring every major Fridayman fleet movement so far and none of them are making any attempt to catch up to our fleet."

"Are you sure about that?" Ves questioned.

"I am. While I cannot guarantee that our spies and the operatives of the Hex Federation are able to track every possible enemy troop movement, many Fridayman mech divisions are simply staying put at the moment. The risks of attacking us are too great and Victory will inevitably incur a massive price. The Fridaymen should at least wait until our Golden Skull Alliance has left before launching any sort of retaliatory attack."

Ves looked suspicious. "I would have thought that the Carnegies, Vermeers, Puffers and Vanguarders would secretly form a massive fleet to ambush us now that our fleet and forces have incurred a lot of damage. We still haven't recovered our strength, after all. Even the Mars isn't in a state to compete against a hostile ace mech."

"We thought about that, but the necessary condition to take advantage of our weakness is if they can muster at least 150,000 mechs, dozens of expert



mechs and one ace mech. Do you think it is easy for those coalition partners to play a high-stakes game and bet their capital for a military victory that does not yield much strategic gains? Don't forget that Patriarch Reginald isn't even a Hexer ace pilot. He's a mercenary, essentially. Once this is over, his relationship with the Hexers will come to an end."

"Hm, I guess you're right."

Ves understood this logic. The only possible reason to attack the combined fleet was to weaken the strength of the Hex Army, but as long as Patriarch Reginald Cross and the Mars was in the neighborhood, a retaliatory action inevitably demanded the deployment of an ace pilot and ace mech.

There was no way the Fridayman wanted to send out their ace pilots so easily. One had already died in Pima Prime. It was a lot less risky to keep these strategic assets in their respective star systems and use them as a deterrent against further attacks.

Calabast smirked. "In general, the Fridaymen are afraid that we might choose to raid another vulnerable colony. It is in their best interest to have us leave their territory as soon as possible. This goes especially for the four weaker coalition partners who secretly supported our offensive operation. They all got what they wanted. Now they just want us to go so that they can begin to take advantage of the changed order within their state."

As the days passed by, the territories of the Friday Colonies remained remarkably quiet.

The Hexers contemptuously thought that the Fridaymen had been spooked silly, but Ves knew that their old enemies had made the most rational choice.

Since everyone around him told him that the situation was under control, Ves no longer bothered to think about the dangers and proceeded to spend his time on repairing his expert mechs.

Each of them incurred at least some form of damage during the last battle. Mechs that performed well in battle such as the Dark Zephyr only needed a few days in the workshop to make them ready for another serious engagement.

Other expert mechs required a bit more effort to restore to their peak condition.

Machines such as the Riot, the First Sword, the Everchanger and the Promethea received so many wounds that Gloriana had to come up with individual repair plans that required the help of multiple Journeymen to restore all of the powerful but exacting machines.

It was especially troublesome to repair the masterwork expert mechs such as the Amaranto and the Everchanger because only a few people possessed the capability to produce replacement parts that met the exceedingly high standards.

Gloriana predictably had to do most of the work. She even passed on her three kids to Ves and Shannon Maris because she simply couldn't find the time to perform her responsibilities as a mother during these busy times.

The restoration of the expert mechs was an acute priority to the Larkinson Clan!

The sooner they regained their full battle effectiveness, the less they had to fear from the threats of the Red Ocean!

Gloriana estimated that almost all of the Larkinson expert mechs should be fixed within a month.

The only notable exception was the Shield of Samar.

Gloriana didn't know what to say when the discussion turned to this utterly ruined expert space knight.

"What do we do, Ves?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, to be honest. I've been thinking about it for a while, but I haven't made any solid plans as of yet. Let me talk to Jannzi again. I will discuss the options with her to determine how we can best move on from this tragedy."

### **Chapter 4340 Unhealthy Attachment**

The high-end workshop of the Spirit of Bentheim had become a busy place as soon as the Larkinsons commenced their repairs on their expert mechs.

It became a hazard to keep the paltry remains of the Shield of Samar in this space, so Ves had it moved to a spare hall where it could remain undisturbed.

Venerable Jannzi spent a lot of time in this compartment. Though she still went back to her family from time to time in order to care for her son Mercer, the Shield of Samar was such an important part of her life that she couldn't bear to stay away for long.

Ves looked rather troubled as he noticed how unreasonable she behaved. Jannzi had sat down and leaned her back against the exterior of the Shield of Samar's separated head.

If not for the fact that a maintenance crew had carefully cleaned it so that it didn't pose a hazard anymore, he wouldn't have allowed Jannzi to stick so close to whatever was left of her expert mech.

She had stripped off her protective suit and touched the metal surface with her unprotected hands!

"Jannzi." Ves greeted the expert pilot as he approached. "I'm aware that you are still in a mourning period, but it is time to discuss how we should proceed with your future."

"Isn't it obvious what you should do?" Jannzi looked up at him. "You can fix this. You can fix my battle partner. She's still alive. I know she is. I can feel it

inside this head. I have been trying so hard to contact and resonate with my living mech, and I have made a bit of progress."

She pressed her palm harder against the metal surface and closed her eyes.

Ves could feel that she was trying her best to extend her force of will and resonate with the remnant of the Shield of Samar's spiritual foundation.

"Do... you see... Ves? My Sammie... is still alive."

The close relationship and compatibility between the two actually yielded a result. The giant mech head glowed blue for a moment, but much of the activity quickly faded as Jannzi had overstrained her willpower.

"Be careful, Jannzi." He warned. "What you have just done could be dangerous for you. The Shield of Samar may no longer be complete, but it is still a stretch for you to resonate with this remnant without the help of a neural interface."

Ves became quite impressed with what Jannzi managed to accomplish. What she had done was similar to how a swordmaster was able to resonate with a treasured sword.

Of course, Jannzi's efforts were much less effective because the scale was too big. It was just far too difficult for an expert pilot to resonate with just a small part of a mech in this fashion.

The demonstration had given Ves a few ideas. Though the connection between Jannzi and the spiritual remains of her expert mech lasted for a short moment, he noticed that the latter actually revitalized to a tiny extent.

The spiritual feedback of an expert pilot provided it with rich nutrition!

Not only that, but the strong bond and affection also seemed to help it regain a bit of personality again.

The differences may have been too small to notice any obvious changes, but Ves was probably the greatest authority of living mechs. His observation capabilities were great and he was exceptionally sensitive towards fluctuations in life.

Ves became a lot more certain on how he should proceed with this case after processing the empirical data that he had just received.

"I have a couple of suggestions on how to go forward, Jannzi. Would you like to hear what I have in mind?"

The female expert pilot nodded. "Please. I have been waiting to hear from you for days. The longer my Shield of Samar goes on without getting restored, the more I fear for its future."

"That is understandable. In my opinion, the Shield of Samar has already died, but there is enough of it left that we may be able to get a version of it back."

"What would this version look like, exactly?" Venerable Jannzi critically asked.

"That is indeed an important question." Ves replied. "The process is important. What we can get at the end will heavily depend on the steps we take to provide you with another expert mech. Let's start with the obvious approach. Normally, a situation like yours is solved by providing you with a brand-new expert mech that might share resemblances to your old machine but is fundamentally a separate machine."

"That is unacceptable to me. I will never pilot another mech that isn't my Sammie. I made a vow. More than that, the two of us simply belong together. I can't imagine ever entering the battlefield in a mech that is different from my long-standing partner."

Ves frowned a bit when he heard that.

Normally, he would applaud a mech pilot's strong attachment to a living mech, but certain people tended to take it too far. Mech pilots inevitably needed to switch to new machines when their older ones broke down in battle.

Still, Jannzi's attitude fell in line with his own ideals. Ves did not want to discourage this behavior, especially considering that Jannzi's relationship with the Shield of Samar had provided him with a lot of research and reference data on third order living mechs over the years.

"Okay, so we can agree on trying to restore your battle effectiveness by providing you with an expert mech that is related to the Shield of Samar in one form or another. The question now is how closely the reconstructed machine should match your original expert mech."

Jannzi narrowed her eyes. "What's wrong with trying to reconstruct the Shield of Samar according to its latest design? Someone with your skill should be able to do it, and if you can't do it, your wife can probably do better. I don't care if it can't be a masterwork anymore. As long as the form is the same, the living mech should be the same as well."

He sighed and waved his arm at the large pile of corroded and deformed pieces of metal slag. "It's not that simple, Jannzi. Do you think we can simply take all of this metal that has been dissolved by the Skorpion Kommando's extremely potent venom and turn it back into your original mech again? It's not possible!"

"What? Why not?!"

"There are many reasons why we can't. First, much of your mech is made out of Unending alloy. Your design literally can't work if there is not enough Unending alloy anymore. We wouldn't have been in so much trouble if the Skorpion Kommando merely tore your expert space knight apart. We could have at least picked up all of the pieces and put them back together without

too much loss. That hasn't happened, though. The phasewater-enriched corrosive fluids that literally melted your Shield of Samar produced a lot of chemical reactions that essentially broke down a huge amount of Unending alloy. The slag that you see here can't be called Unending alloy anymore because of that reason. It has degraded into different compounds that are much weaker and less stable."

Though Jannzi did not have a technical background, she still understood that it was possible to reconstruct an alloy as long as the base materials were still present.

"Why can't you remake Unending alloy again?"

"It's complicated. First and foremost, we don't understand its production process. This is an absolutely remarkable material that can't be made by melting a bunch of different metals before pooling it together in a giant cauldron. It's an ancient product of alien high technology that requires a lot of mysterious steps to make. I've invested a fair amount of research on this topic, but my efforts have never yielded any positive results. Without Unending alloy, there is no possibility of restoring the Shield of Samar."

"Can't you just redesign it with a different and more accessible material in place of Unending alloy?" Jannzi frowned.

Ves shook his head. "Impossible. Unending alloy is unique. It is as tough as a low-grade first-class alloy but it is also a spiritually-reactive material. I have found no comparable material that possesses both properties. Perhaps that might change in the future, but it will probably take many years before I can find a reasonable substitute for Unending alloy."

"Then what does this mean?"

"It means that no matter what, the expert mech that we will develop for you will look and function differently from your Shield of Samar." Ves spoke. "I will

try my best to procure the best possible materials that we can afford to make sure the defensive power of your new machine won't be any worse than your original expert mech, but the inherently different properties means that the design will not be as familiar as you wish. We will also incorporate better tech, better design solutions and brand-new innovations in your expert mech."

A typical expert pilot would definitely become pleased after hearing all of this. Who didn't want to pilot a stronger and better mech?

Jannzi was different, however. Her expression soured as Ves kept listing out the changes he had in mind.

"I don't want a better mech! I want my old one back! What you just told me doesn't sound like my Shield of Samar at all! I won't accept any solution that entails designing a completely different expert space knight only to slap the name of my battle partner on it. What I want is the return of THIS!"

Her palm smacked against the surface of her old expert mech's head!

Ves waited a few seconds for Jannzi to calm down.

"...We can still do that, you know? I never said anything about abandoning your old living mech."

"What do you mean?"

"Perhaps it is better if I show you the plan that I have come up with in recent days. I can guarantee you that you will be satisfied with my new design concept."

Ves activated his comm and projected a simple design interface. He proceeded to lift his armored fingers and began to sketch out different lines.

His audience remained patient and stared as a possible expert mech slowly became more defined.



At first, Jannzi's skepticism remained strong. The expert mech envisioned by Ves might be a space knight, but its proportions, contours and overall feel were substantially different from the Shield of Samar that was forever seared in her memories.

It was also clear that Ves wanted to take Jannzi's new expert mech into a different design direction than before.

Previously, the Shield of Samar was incredibly slow and heavy but also tough and resilient.

The sloppy draft design that Ves was drawing in the air looked a bit leaner and less weighed down. A number of its design elements even looked more similar to the Skorpion Kommando than the original Shield of Samar!

Though Jannzi was preparing to launch another tirade after Ves completed his sketch, her mood quickly changed once Ves drew the final elements that completed the draft design.

The reason for her restraint was because when Ves drew the head of the new expert space knight, Jannzi recognized a lot of familiar elements.

In fact, the head of the new expert mech corresponded exactly to the mech head that she was leaning her back against at this moment!

"There. I'm done." Ves said and smiled as he gazed appreciatively at his own work. "This is the new concept that I have in mind. While it is not close to a faithful reproduction of your Shield of Samar at all, I don't think it is a good idea to cling too much to the past. No matter whether you want to admit it or not, your old expert mech has died. That doesn't mean you are left with nothing, though."

Jannzi's expression became mixed as she tried to figure out her feelings towards the new proposal. "Is this your new idea? It looks like you designed a

brand-new expert mech but left out the head so that you can slot in the surviving mech head in its place. Isn't this just a Frankenstein mech!?"

"Not exactly." Ves shook his head. "I call this... the Dullahan Project."