

The Mech Touch

- Chapter 4661: Temporary Freedom |

Chapter 4661: Temporary Freedom

By the time Ketis left so that she could formally file the paperwork for her new Storm Sword Project, Ves leaned back on his chair and settled into his thoughts.

Thankfully, none of the other Journeymen requested his time so that they could fill his thoughts with even more unusual mech concepts.

The Woodpecker Project and the Storm Sword Project already occupied his imagination. That was on top of the plundering spree that Ketis had suggested as a possible means to acquire new first-class materials!

Ves didn't know whether it was safe and viable enough to go on a continuous alien warship hunt in the following years.

Before his talk with Ketis, he had already set his mind on keeping his expeditionary fleet outside of hotspots like the border region between Krakatoa and Zelmar.

The Larkinson Clan and its allies needed a lot of time to digest all of their recent gains and break in a lot of powerful net combat assets.

Therefore, it was not suitable for the expeditionary fleet to dive right back into trouble again.

"Maybe I can find a middle ground." He murmured. "We don't have to hunt down and ambush an alien warfleet every month. Once a year or twice a year is enough in my book."

This was especially the case if the Golden Skull Alliance finally expanded from three to five members!

The Adelaide Mercenary Company's Third Fleet and the Boojay Family did not go out of their way to join the party because they looked forward to mining asteroids in an out-of-the-way star system for months on end.

They expressed their intention to join because they wanted to take part in massive operations and earn a lot of loot and MTA merits on a regular basis!

"I need to talk to a lot of people." Ves concluded.

As the expeditionary fleet calmly made its way out of the border region and made its way back to the Davute System, a lot of talks indeed took place.

Ves sometimes took part in them, but he wanted to devote more time on his various design and research projects.

He devoted a considerable amount of effort on progressing all of his ongoing mech design projects.

The Dullahan Project, the Ghost Project and the Eye Project all received the bulk of his attention.

While he was also involved in other mech design projects, they could either wait or were already being worked on by other colleagues.

He regularly met and worked together with people such as Gloriana, Juliet Stameross, Miles Tovar and Cormaunt Hempkamp.

Ves especially made sure to be extra attentive when working together with the latter two mech designers. Miles, Cormaunt and Merrill had either become Journeymen somewhat recently or had only joined the clan recently. They did not have a lot of experience with leading design projects in the Design Department.

Fortunately, all three of them were coping well so far. Miles and Merrill had been with the Larkinsons for a long time while Cormaunt was a talented and clever Journeyman in his own right.

Though Cormaunt Hempkamp was clearly the least 'Larkinson' out of all of the lead designers in the Design Department, that also allowed him to look at the clan from an outsider's perspective.

The older hires such as the Voiken siblings and the Power Pair spent enough years in the clan to lose that quality. They identified themselves as Larkinsons first, which meant that they had fully accepted their separation from their old lives.

In any case, Ves always enjoyed talking with Cormaunt about what life was like outside of the clan.

"You know." Cormaunt said as he worked on designing the technical interfaces of the Geist System. "If I tried to pull any of this off at my old school and employers, the people around me would call me a degenerate war criminal before calling in the authorities to put me in chains. What we are trying to do with the Ghost Project is absolutely crazy if you think about it. I don't know what possessed you to not only come up with the idea of exploiting the decapitated head of an expert pilot to generate metaphysical covert attack

spurs. Even I have to stop and try to wrap my mind around what exactly we are trying to make."

Ves glanced at his current collaboration partner. "Are you having second thoughts about the Ghost Project? I admit that it can be a little spooky, and I can't promise you that I have everything under control. All I can say for now is that our upcoming work will either become the most effective and innovative expert stealth mech of this mech generation, or it will turn into such a catastrophic failure that we cannot even guarantee Venerable Zimro Belson will be able to come out with his life intact."

The more the pair worked on the Ghost Project, the more they became cognizant of all of the ways it could go wrong. They were very much working on unfamiliar territory here. Though their respective specialties gave them a solid direction on how to go forward, whether they would be able to realize their promising ideas was another matter altogether.

"Any talk about risking the life of an expert pilot can already land you in jail in most jurisdictions. People do not take kindly to mech designers who are willing to play fast and loose with mech pilots, especially the heroes among them. Neural interface specialists such as myself must constantly check our own work in order to avoid the hint of excessive damage." Cormaunt spoke in a strained tone.

Ves chuckled in response. "It's a good thing that I am the one who is setting the rules in our clan. That said, I am not inclined to tolerate that kind of stuff either, but I am more open to well-intentioned ideas that have the support of the mech pilots in question. The Geist System we are working on may produce untold damage if it runs out of control, but as long as we remain careful and implement as many precautions as possible, we can limit the damage."

The other Journeyman Mech Designer still found it astonishing that his own boss was willing to tolerate so much risk. The professionals he worked with and spent time with before all exhibited so much caution that they were rarely willing to step outside of proscribed areas even if their ideas held more promise!

"Do you think you will maintain this outlook towards experimentation in the long run?" Cormaunt carefully asked. "I love what you are doing, but there are clear downsides to your approach. Will I be able to keep experimenting with neural interfaces and other related projects, or will you tighten the reins in the future?"

"Hmm." Ves did not immediately respond. He spent a minute or so in thought before he answered the question. "The reason why most of your previous employers set firm rules is because their main mech designers are already accomplished enough. Masters and so on have moved past the stage where they need to engage in reckless and wild experimentation in order to produce strong results. They don't want their subordinates to pull off anything crazy either, hence why people such as yourself always get shackled. In our case, I cannot guarantee that I will remain as tolerant and free-spirited as now. I

will be in the same position as your previous bosses, so I am obliged to make sure that no one engages in war crimes under my nose."

It was a difficult position to be in. As an innovator himself, he hated being shackled or restricted, which was exactly why he insisted on becoming his own boss.

While he may be able to play fast and loose with rules for now, once the Design Department expanded and professionalized even further, it was no longer possible for Ves to monitor everything that was going on anymore. That vastly increased the risk of accidents.

In the end, Ves could not give a satisfactory answer to Cormaunt Hempkamp. Hopefully, the Design Department would no longer need to depend on too much radical innovation in order to produce satisfactory results in the future.

The pair of Journeymen continued to work on the Ghost Project whenever they could.

With Cormaunt Hempkamp busying himself with creating a stable interface between Object 335 and the rest of the Geist System, it was up to Ves to shape its more esoteric properties.

This was quite difficult because Ves did not have an existing template to draw upon. He needed to invent everything from scratch, and that caused his progress to slow down more than he wished despite his massive increase in productivity.

One of the areas that he remained stuck on was how he could obtain the specters that functioned as the spiritual semi-autonomous attack spurs of the Ghost Project.

After a lot of theorizing and puzzling, he formulated two different plans on how he could proceed.

"There are two possible ways I can solve this problem." Ves frowned in thought. "I can either make the ghosts myself or I can harvest them from other sources."

The former amounted to creating spiritual products from whatever ingredients he had on hand.

The latter amounted to killing other organisms, harvesting their spiritualities by force and stuffing whatever he obtained into the Geist System!

Neither of these options sounded ideal to him. Manually creating the specters for the Ghost Project sounded like a tedious job, and Ves was not entirely confident that he could produce ones that functioned effectively enough in the field.

Taking the spiritualities from existing individuals and integrating them into the Geist System sounded like a much more effective idea. The troublesome part was finding the

raw materials. They needed to be high enough in strength and quality to be worth a damn in the field.

As Ves continued to think about where he should get his ghosts, he suddenly remembered that Helena might know a thing or two about this subject.

"Helena!"

"Yes, little bro?" His sister's intangible body materialized next to Ves in the design lab.

"I'd like to receive your input on a matter that I am working on. I think it will interest you a lot."

He was not wrong. Helena looked increasingly more intrigued as Ves outlined the Ghost Project and its signature Geist System.

"Ves! How come you were working on something so good without involving me from the start?!" His sister flew over and whacked his head with her hand to express her dissatisfaction. "I happen to know a thing or two about ghosts. While I am not an expert in them, I at least know more about them than you, I bet."

"Maybe you're right." Ves reluctantly said. "Anyway, can you help me out here? Can you supply me with a batch of nasty ghosts? They need to be vicious enough to pose a threat to other life, but they also have to be pliable enough for the Geist System to direct their actions."

"You're asking a lot from me here, brother. In the first place, I don't even know whether this 'Geist System' of yours will work out the way you think. It sounds a bit dubious if you think about it. How can you possibly come up with the idea of using the willpower of a captive expert pilot as a way to give ghosts the strength and ability to interfere in the material realm? Even I cannot say whether it can be done!"

"That is part of the reason why I called you here." Ves patiently replied to his sister. "The best way to find out whether a new innovation is viable or not is to conduct experiments. I am thinking about trying out several different possibilities and see what happens. It would be nice if I have an expert on death on hand such as yourself."

Helena hesitated for a few seconds. "Fine. I will help you out, but you should build a more comfortable form for me first. It is exhausting for me to show up like this all of the time."

Chapter 4662: The Gray Lady

If Ves wanted to conduct an experiment relating to 'ghosts' with Helena's input, then he had to make it a little more convenient for her to interact with him aboard the Spirit of Bentheim.

"It shouldn't be a problem for me to create an animated totem for you to walk around and explore." He told her. "In fact, I already promised that I would do the same for our third order living mechs. I have been holding off on this side project so that I can work on my existing backlog, but I guess I can make a mechanical avatar for you first."

"You better make a pretty doll for me then!" Helena demanded.

Ves already stood up and was making his way out of the design lab so that he could go down to his personal workshop.

"Let me start with making a quick and dirty prototype that can serve as a proof of concept. I want to test whether it is even possible and practical for you to inhabit a mechanical avatar and control it effectively enough. I have never really tried this out before with any other spiritual entity."

"I don't think there is a cause for concern, brother. I've become pretty strong, you know. I will definitely be able to control any device you make!"

"Let's see."

Once Ves reached his workshop, he only spent a few more minutes on finalizing a rough mechanical avatar design.

The rush job was incomparable to his serious products. Its design not only featured a lot of obvious suboptimal design elements, but also lacked a lot of originality as Ves just straight up copied design solutions from his older works!

Still, it should be able to function decently enough while also maintaining a fairly serviceable connection to Helena, and that was enough.

When Ves went ahead and fabricated the design using generic second-class materials that were already available in the workshop, the AP-VEX superfab quickly chugged along and completed the job in less than fifteen minutes.

As a quality first-class superfab endorsed by the MTA, Ves was continually amazed at the capabilities of the AP-Vex. It had become even more powerful in his hands after his recent evolution. His increased skills and cognitive abilities enabled him to better make use of the more advanced and intellectually-demanding features of the high-tech machine!

Ves actually spent a little more time on fabricating Helena's experimental mechanical avatar because he couldn't completely get rid of the habits he inherited from his wife.

Helena might be a self-proclaimed goddess, but she possessed a superficial understanding of technology.

Perhaps she might be able to master enough science and engineering to make her own gadgets just by existing long enough, but that would probably take decades if not longer.

For now, Helena had no idea what was going on because she did not have the necessary knowledge to interpret the complicated technical readouts of the superfab's interface.

It might as well be gibberish in her eyes!

"When are you done, brother?" Helena clung onto his back like a koala.

"Almost. You'll have your avatar in another minute or two. Look, this green light over here says that the last parts have already been fabricated. I just need to make sure to add them to the construct and complete a few checks before the machine is done."

By the time the AP-VEX superfab opened up the tray that displayed the finished product, Ves looked at his latest work with a decent amount of appreciation.

"So what do you think, sis? It looks quite pretty despite how little time I spent on its design."

"..."

"Helena?"

The spiritual entity that was clinging onto his back had grown a lot colder and more frigid this time!

"...Ves...?"

"Yes...?"

"What... is... the... meaning... of... this?!"

"It's a convenient body that you can inhabit whenever you want to extend your presence in our clan."

"Your work looks nothing like me! It's a cat! A gray cat!"

The freshly fabricated mechanical avatar turned out to resemble a black mechanical cat!

The newly-designed and fabricated cat avatar shared a great resemblance to both Lucky and Veronica. In order to make sure to differentiate the gray cat avatar from the two existing cats, he made sure to shrink its proportions by 20 percent.

Ves thought that his new cat avatar looked cute, but his sister held a different opinion.

"BROTHER!" Helena roared while she attempted to pull on his ear! "I wanted you to make a doll, not a cat! Do you think I want to go around pretending to be a cat?! I'm a death goddess! I am far more powerful than any feline!"

"Hey, don't knock it until you try it! Besides, there are good reasons why I opted to make a cat as opposed to a humanoid avatar."

"What sick and twisted reasons did you have for forcing me to become a cat?!"

Ves patiently explained his concerns with regards to the MTA. The same reason why he was reluctant to give his living mechs a humanoid interface also applied to his design spirits.

No matter how helpful they were to everyone who utilized his living mechs, there was no denying that his design spirits weren't entirely human.

Spiritual entities derived from alien life forms such as the Illustrious One, Qilanxo, Titania and the Phase King never thought of themselves as human in the first place.

Their frequent and regular contact with human mech pilots did not give them any reason to humanize themselves. They merely became more familiar with the human species, that was all. The alien design spirits all possessed a strong sense of identity and their fixed spiritual attributes made it difficult for them to deviate from their nature.

The 'human' design spirits occupied a gray area more or less. Entities such as the Solemn Guardian, Lufa and the Superior Mother possessed undeniable human roots, but their thinking patterns were completely unrecognizable.

In fact, even if a design spirit was almost perfectly identical to a normal human, Ves still didn't want to take the risk!

As Helena impatiently listened to her brother's serious concerns, she let go a bit of her anger.

She still felt pissed, but she did not blame her brother as much as before.

"I thought you were pals with the MTA. Won't they cut you a bit of slack?" She questioned.

"I am good friends with a part of the MTA." He corrected his sister. "The Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction are more than willing to cut me a bit of slack, but the same can't be said for the other factions. There is always a chance that a mecher from an opposing faction will pick any flaw and use that to attack me. I can't let my mechanical avatars turn into a controversy."

In the end, his sister accepted his excuse and agreed to play along... for now. She dove into the mechanical gray cat and tried to take control over her systems.

The process was jerky at first. Helena was working with a completely unfamiliar interface, and she did not possess a good understanding of cats.

"FZRRZZRZURUUAUZURRZZ."

Ves put his palm on the gray cat's back. "Ah, don't try to talk through the avatar's speakers just yet. There are a few tricks to it that are easier to master once you have learned how to control all of the cat's limbs."

He patiently guided his goddess sister on how to control the limbs and basic mechanical systems of her animated totem. It did not take her long to be able to move around like a jerky cat who was just recovering from getting sedated.

Learning how to talk took a bit longer. By the time Helena managed to speak anything else than static, the workshop became filled with the synthesized mewls of a new cat!

"Mraw... mraw...?"

"That's it, Helena." Ves grinned as he rubbed the gray mechanical cat's head. "You sound so cute. Do it again, please."

"Mraww... mraw! Mraw mraw mraw! MRAWWW!"

"OUCH! Stop trying to claw my face! It's useless! I made sure to leave that out of the design!"

"MRAAAAAAAW!"

After the angry gray cat tried to punish Ves for his antics, Helena's spiritual manifestation angrily left her mechanical avatar.

"I can tolerate your decision to pair me up with a cat body, but I will not accept these undignified cat sounds. I sound like a baby!"

"Oh, come on, sister! Sounding like a cat is part of being a cat. Besides, you don't need to talk like a human. I can understand you just fine."

"THAT'S NOT THE POINT! Get rid of this junk and make sure to design a proper cat next time! It needs to be elegant, beautiful, decorated and above all SPEAK HUMAN WORDS!"

It took a lot of haranguing for Helena to get her demand through her brother's thick skull.

"Okay, okay! I promise to do better next time, alright? Can you stuff yourself back inside the cat avatar for the time being? I know it isn't what you expected, but it is all I can make on short notice. I promise that I will make a proper and exquisite mechanical cat avatar for you. I've got plenty of salvaged first-class exotics in stock to make a product that will make other mechanical cats jealous."

"I will hold you to that, Ves."

They finally got back on track once all of the drama had passed. Ves picked up the prototype Helcat and moved to a different location in order to begin his experiments.

"Mraw mraw mraw." The gray cat impatiently squirmed in his grasp.

"Here you go, sis."

He placed the cat on the table before pulling out a strange mechanical contraption from one of the nearby drawers.

He showed off the device to the gray cat.

"This is a device I made to test one of the mechanisms of the Geist System. It is a simple interface which I have made to enable a single mind to control a ghost-like entity. This experimental device has a lot of flaws and can't serve as a completely representative example of the greater system, but I should be able to gather a lot of useful data once I get it to work."

The gray cat tilted her head. "Mraw?"

"It is too soon to experiment with Object 335 directly, so I need a substitute. I can use either myself or you, and I think that you are much more suitable to take on the role of a controller. If anything goes wrong, you are much more capable of resisting any adverse effects."

"Mraw? MRAW!"

"I'm not treating you as my labrat! You're... you're my labcat! Yes, a labcat! You are a valued helper and you will be able to make a massive contribution to science as long as you cooperate with my experiments! Let's just try it out and see what happens, alright?"

"Mraw..."

Despite Helena's obvious reluctance, Ves proceeded with his experiment.

He figured that it was best to start with the safest option, which was creating a weak spiritual product designed along the lines of a ghostly fiend.

The resulting low-quality 'ghost' were more comparable to the simple spiritual fish-whales that Ves made for Phase King than a fully-fledged design spirit like the Superior Mother.

The gray cat did not look impressed. She looked cute when she sat while placing her forepaws between her rear limbs. Her slender tail swished around in a sinuous pattern.

"Mraw mraw."

"I know the ghost I created is nothing impressive to the likes of you, but cut me some slack, please. Can you interface with my device and try to use it to establish a connection, now? I am really curious to see what will happen on the first attempt."

The gray cat rolled her eyes, but she did as instructed.

Once Helena interfaced with the experimental device and learned how to forge a rudimentary connection with the artificial ghost, an immediate reaction took place.

Pop.

The ghost exploded like a balloon.

"...I can't say I did not foresee this outcome."

"Mraw."

Chapter 4663: The Obvious Answer

As Ves and his sister experimented with trying to acquire and control different ghosts, they made a lot of mistakes.

Many more mistakes than they expected.

In fact, they had yet to produce a single positive result!

Ghost after ghost began to pop as the rudimentary interface that Ves constructed and tweaked continually failed to regulate the amount of power flowing through the connection.

However, all of these catastrophic failures still yielded a lot of clues. No experiment was completely useless. A good researcher could use the outcomes to confirm or deny specific theories and identify points of failures that needed to be addressed in order to produce better results.

After popping over a dozen different variations of ghosts that Ves had artificially produced, Ves and Helena quickly figured out several different reasons why the spiritual products blew up in an instant.

"You're too powerful." Ves told the gray mechanical cat. "The power disparity between you and a poor ghost is so gigantic that even the tiniest possible fraction of power that you can channel through the experimental interface is overwhelming the receiver."

"Mraw mraw mraw." The newly fabricated cat replied in her synthesized voice.

"Hmm, I haven't thought about that." He rubbed his hairless chin. "Even though I made these 'ghosts' with my own power, they are generic spiritual products with attributes inherited from myself considering that I am using up my own spiritual power as ingredients. The biggest problem with that is that my domain is slanted towards life and such, which is probably one of the most positive energies that you can find. Your domain is obviously death, and that definitely falls into the category of negative energy. When you put the two together, it is clear that the two will fight each other if we do not take any special measures."

The gray patted her metal paws against the surface of the desk. "Mraaaw."

"Yeah, I suppose that is the obvious answer. A real ghost should be made out of negative energy. Can you lend me a bit of juice?"

"Mraw?"

"Your energy, Helena! Gimme your power!"

"Mraaaw!" The cat shrieked and moved back as if Ves had just stepped onto her tail!

"Oh, stop being melodramatic. You're the Daughter of Death, right? You should be brimming with energy!"

"Mraw mraw mraw!"

"What is this nonsense about being inappropriate? Just do as I say, sister!"

Ves grabbed a hold of the cat he created and utilized his formidable spiritual strength to draw out a small amount of death energy radiating from the mechanical construct.

"Mrraaaaaaaaw!"

"What's the big deal? I only siphoned a bit of energy away from you. It is not as if you will notice this loss!"

When Ves put the cat back down, the body inhabited by Helena acted as if she had become a wounded animal.

"Mraw mraw mraw..."

Ves ignored her antics. He instead focused on the death energy that he had managed to extract from his eldest sister and studied its properties carefully.

He had to be exceedingly careful about handling it because he could easily cancel it out if he touched it directly with his own life-attributed spiritual energy.

He had studied and handled death energy in the past. Projects such as the Valkyrie Redeemer, the Death and Gray Lotus allowed him to gain a decent understanding of the peculiar traits of the spiritual attributes of death.

"It is an antithesis towards life. Normally, it should be impossible to use it to animate anything."

That was not entirely true. He had been able to create the Death Lotus for Helena easily enough, so not everything was absolute.

However, it was undeniable that life and death acted like fire and water in each other's presence.

In order to test this relationship, Ves took away a tiny mote of death energy and tried to act upon it by infusing it with his life-attributed spiritual energy.

Predictably, both of them reacted as if they were made up of a bunch of particles and antiparticles. The opposing energies essentially annihilated each other, producing... something... that quickly dispersed out of sight.

The outcome of this particular reaction interested him a lot, and normally he would be more than willing to follow up on this interesting direction of research, but he had a job to do. He needed to make the most important mechanisms of the Geist System work before he could go off exploring random stuff again.

Ves recognized that he had become sidetracked far too many times as of late. If he wanted to get anything serious done, he needed to rein in his boundless curiosity and exert more discipline over the way he spent his time.

The involvement of his sister helped to keep him in line. He could not occupy her time in vain.

"In any case, how can I bring this to life in a form that is usable to the Ghost Project?"

The gray cat had something to say about that. "Mraw mraw mraw."

"The Death Lotus is a good example to draw upon, but don't forget that it shares a symbiotic relationship with you. It is not capable of sustaining itself on its own as I expressly designed it to feed off your own death energy. What I need to make for the Ghost Project is a living spiritual construct that is made out of death energy or other kinds of negative energy. What is most important is that the animated ghosts can operate far outside the expert mech it is operating from. This requirement imposes harsher demands on the stability, strength and cohesion of the spiritual constructs."

There were ways to animate death energy in order to produce actual life. The most significant example was Helena herself. Somehow, their mother had gathered a lot of death energy in the Nyxian Gap and borrowed Ves' own energies in order to give it the spark of life, thereby birthing a brand-new daughter.

Ves hadn't witnessed this event himself and he could only vaguely guess at the steps that his mother had taken to bring life to Helena.

In any case, he could not employ the high-end, resource-intensive process that produced his sister to make a bunch of low-end ghosts. That was as stupid and wasteful as using a battleship cannon to kill a random human on the street.

He needed to attain his goal through other means, but the problem was that less elaborate methods might not work.

"It's this damn annihilation effect that is getting in my way." He grumbled as he continued to stare at the death energy that was slowly dispersing despite his best efforts to contain it. "Anything I do will cause it to pop and disappear like the earlier ghosts I have made."

As Ves thought on how to overcome this persistent problem, his sister decided to pitch in at this time.

"Mraw mraw mraw." The gray cat eloquently spoke as she patted her paw against her solid metal chest and produced multiple soft metal pinging sounds as a result. "Mraaaaaw mraw."

"Huh?" He turned towards the cat in surprise. "That is a good point! The fact that you are able to possess a rudimentary cat avatar without any obvious issues is clearly a notable phenomenon. Let me take a good look at you again."

"Mraw!"

This time, the gray mechanical cat tried to turn around to escape his reach, but Helena's control over the new body was anything but perfect.

Ves easily caught his creation and brought her closer to him so that he could study the cat's body with all of his senses.

"Interesting..." He hummed as he held the cat aloft with both his hands and studied how Helena integrated with the mechanical construct and what sort of effects this induced onto the metal components. "From what I can see, the components haven't degraded at all. This might change over time, but for now it is already enough for me to draw a conclusion."

"Mraaaaaw! Mraaaaaw!"

The cat ineffectually paddled her limbs in the air. It looked kind of cute given how Ves made her a tad bit smaller than his other cats.

"Metal is the answer." Ves stated as if he had just woken up to the most obvious truth in reality. "I should have thought about it before. Metal is one of the most neutral and unbiased elements that exist. Its properties are so stable and unremarkable that it is inherently capable of holding or combining with other elements!"

Mechs served as the most striking example of this relation!

An incredible variety of mech designers had emerged over the centuries. While many of them opted to pursue fairly plain and boring specializations, there were also more extreme visionaries who based their design philosophies on different elements such as the Heart of Fire or the Lord of Atlantis.

Their amazing works showed that mechs did not have to remain stuck as ordinary metal products. Machines could become much more exciting with a bit of special power.

If Ves was able to make his mechs alive by utilizing his design philosophy, then he could most certainly harness her death energy as long as he made use of metal as a stabilizing medium!

The results were often a lot stabler and more closely connected to the material realm than anchorless spiritual constructs!

"Mraw mraw!"

Ves finally put the cat back onto the worktable. "I've seen enough."

While the offended cat retreated to a safer distance from her nasty brother, Ves already headed over to the drawers and pulled out a dark alloy bar.

"I've just got a good idea. Give time to put this together."

He could have utilized his AP-VEX superfab to quickly process this material into a finished product, but he wanted to make it a touch more personal.

He became struck by inspiration and decided to channel his surging creativity by working the metal material with hand tools.

He bought out his collection of advanced precision tools and began to slim down and sculpt the metal bar.

Strangely enough, he did not visualize a specific design for his next product beforehand. He did not feel the need to follow his usual rigid but foolproof design process for a simple creation.

Instead, he let his imagination flow wild while largely letting his hands work on autopilot.

It was a pleasant and relaxing experience where he focused more on the conceptual and intangible side of his work than the nitty gritty technical work.

Of course, Ves could never work over the metal bar so easily if he didn't already possess a lot of technical skills and practice with working by hand.

His strong affinity for mechs and indirect affinity of metal through his incarnation Vulcan also assisted him a lot.

In fact, half of the reason why he was able to work as skillfully as a master smith or craftsman was because he could borrow from Vulcan's acquired expertise at any time.

While Ves got lost into his own little world while he steadily shaped the material in his possession into a more defined shape, the gray cat sat on the table and watched her brother at work.

"Mraw~" The cat lifted up a paw and licked it with a cute but dry metal tongue.

Helena enjoyed the sight of her brother at work. He always exuded a distinct charm that channeled his passion, skill and determination.

Though Ves initially attracted the gray cat's attention, her artificial eyes soon drifted down to the metal statue that increasingly took shape.

It became more and more defined as Ves shaved off the excess metal and shaped the material that remained.

Due to his exquisite skills, it did not take that long before Helena could see what Ves was trying to make.

"Mraw... mraw?!"

The almost black metal alloy slowly assumed the shape of a ferocious demon!

The wicked-looking horns, the grin that displayed fine needle-like teeth that took a fair amount of time for Ves to shape, the wings of a bat, the tail of a lizard and a pair of legs that ended with sharp, oversized claws all added to the menace and evil of the creature that Ves spontaneously gave shape.

The gray cat's body shuddered for a moment. How could her pleasant and gentle spawn such an awful monstrosity from his imagination with such ease!?

Whatever the case, once Ves put the finishing touches of his latest spontaneous work, the demon statue had reached its final form.

As Ves reverently placed it onto the work table, the gray cat sitting next to it quickly jumped a few steps backwards as if she was afraid of getting attacked or corrupted by the demon that had come to life!

"Oh, come on, Helena. This is nothing compared to you. Is the widdle big bad death goddess afraid of a funny-looking metal figurine?"

"Mraaaaaw!"

"Stop exaggerating so much. I'm perfectly normal! There are no dark thoughts swimming in my mind at all! Now come over here, please. I need to squeeze a bit of extra juice out of you so that I can animate a ghost with the help of my new fiend vessel."

"MRAAW!" The gray cat turned around and ran away as if she had turned into the victim in a horror drama!

Chapter 4664: Fiendish Creation

After Ves exerted a bit more effort to capture his overreacting sister, he shook her mechanical cat avatar a few more times and managed to squeeze a more liberal quantity of spare death energy from her this time.

He tossed the offended cat aside after he extracted enough value from her and quickly brought the gathered death energy closer to the statue.

Of course, that did not do much in itself aside from harming what little life that Ves had imbued in the creation of a totem.

Ves had already expected this to happen, so he worked quickly to prevent the totem from becoming completely invalid.

He needed to work quickly in order to minimize his losses as much as possible.

"Let's compact this first."

He exerted his considerable spiritual strength to squeeze the gas-like free-floating death energy into a more compressed crystallized form.

Once he obtained a dark crystal that was a bit more stable and inert than what he had before, he shaped his power into a hammer and began to fracture the seemingly solid spiritual fragment into tiny shards!

"That's one."

He redirected his spiritual hammer against the spiritual foundation of his fiend statue, causing it to 'die' and shatter into pieces as well!

"That's two!"

Ves quickly moved on to the next steps before his shards fizzled out and disappeared entirely.

"Blinky! It's showtime!"

Mrow!

His purple companion spirit leapt out of his head and quickly utilized his fantastic control over spiritual energy to gather the shards together and mix them up to ensure that they were evenly dispersed.

Shards made out of life and death almost blended together but did not touch each other directly as of yet. That would cause them to cancel each other out and that was not what Ves wanted to see.

Instead, Blinky utilized his fantastic perception and instinctual understanding of spiritual energy to find odd quirks and exceptions where putting the shards together did not cause them to annihilate each other.

The first connections were the most difficult. No existing structure existed as of yet that could provide a stable platform where the energies of life and death weaved together as if they got along like best friends.

Plenty of shards dissipated due to the time it took for Blinky to make the initial matchups.

However, once the Star Cat overcame the most difficult hurdle, he gained a nascent spiritual construct that could merge with both kinds of shards with a lot less fuss than before.

This allowed Blinky to focus on other concerns, such as trying to shape the growing living spiritual construct into a virtually identical copy of its physical form.

Though this was not the easiest job, Blinky was another version of Ves. This meant that the companion spirit understood the design of the fiend statue just as well as his human half!

Soon enough, the cat completed an exquisite-looking spiritual product with nearly the same degree of skill and precision as Ves!

The spiritual entity that was composed of death given life woke up and announced its existence by unleashing a terrifying roar!

Fortunately, the size and strength of the spiritual fiend was a bit lackluster, which meant that its roar hardly affected anyone.

Ves grabbed the dark metal statuette and presented it to the gobsmacked gray mechanical cat.

"Look! This is what we can accomplish when we combine our powers together! Just like the Death Lotus and the Gray Lotus that I made before, I can combine the main spiritual attributes derived from the both of us to create a new spiritual life form that seamlessly blends our strengths at close to full utilization!"

Ves did not pay attention to the nasty and malevolent appearance of his fiend. He solely had eyes on the more meaningful properties of his latest creation.

The fiend was fully alive. Not only that, but he showed no signs that he was decaying over time. The death energy he inherited from Helena had downgraded a bit as the spiritual product was a much weaker and more inferior life form than the Daughter of Death, but that was no surprise.

"The metal indeed works like a stabilizing factor. Even if I haven't utilized a special material like Black Demon Steel, an ordinary alloy with no unusual biases is able to host this fiend without imposing any handicaps. That is good news."

The gray cat still found her brother's latest creation to be a little creepy, but she also gained a morbid fascination towards the so-called fiend.

She padded closer so that she could take a closer look at the dreadful-looking fiend.

The silent snarls and other unfriendly sounds quickly ceased once the fiend felt Helena's approach.

The fiend actually controlled its violent impulses and prostrated before the Daughter of Death!

Ves grinned at the sight. "Look, sis! It, no, he recognized his mother! Look at how loyal he is towards the principal source of his being. This shows that my latest creation can still be controlled as long as I employ the right levers!"

As Ves basked in the success of his latest creation, Helena became completely outraged by what she heard!

"MRAW!" The gray cat's forepaw pointed at the fiend statuette as if it committed a crime. "MRAW MRAW MRAW!"

"You're not wrong." Ves responded. "I crafted him out of both of our spiritual energies, so he can be considered our offspring in a sense. The same can be said for the Death Lotus and the Gray Lotus, by the way, but this is different because this one actually looks like a living organism. Would you want to name our first descendant?"

"MRAAAAAAW!"

"Oh well. I will do it for you then. Let's call him... Tom."

"MRAW MRAW!"

"Okay, maybe that name is a little simplistic considering the meaning of his creation and the significance his kind will play in my future works. A more elaborate and intimidating name will also help in making him more effective at his upcoming job. Let me think. What are the typical names that people use for dark and evil beings? Lucifer, maybe?"

"Mraw. Mraw."

"Yeah, that might not be appropriate." Ves said while he was in thought. "While this fiend is the first of his kind, he was not born into the light only to fall into darkness. What about... Beelzebub? No, that's not good either. That's usually the fat devil who likes to eat a lot."

"Mraw?"

"Pluto or Hades are both a little too big for our little 'kid'. Just look at him. Do you see how weak he is? This guy can barely harm anyone in his current state."

The gray cat began to look increasingly more thoughtful as she tried to help her brother come up with an appropriate and fitting name for the new creation.

"Moloch, maybe? It has a clear association with devils, so that works, more or less. I don't really know its meaning, though."

"Mraw mraw."

Ves looked impressed. "Abaddon the Destroyer sounds cool enough, but I don't think that entirely fits my new fiend."

After going over a few more suggestions, they eventually found a name that they both could live with. Perhaps they could have settled on a better or more original name if they spent more time on brainstorming, but they had better things to do with their time.

"Mephisto it is, then." Ves affirmed. "This guy looks malevolent enough to bear this name, though he isn't clever and developed enough yet to exhibit the deviousness that is associated with this identity."

One of the reasons why Ves and Helena paid attention to the moniker of the fiend was because names carried power.

Ves had actually noticed this phenomenon in his older works.

The mechs whose names possessed a lot of associations to old and existing myths tended to move towards their ancient namesakes, if only gradually.

This had to do with the spiritual feedback and worship they absorbed from many people who possessed a remarkably consistent idea on what these historical and mythical figures were like.

Shaped by pop culture and the lessons they learned from school, many people thought of Mars, or his 'other' version Ares, as a god that both embodied war and became consumed by it. This caused the living ace mech to gradually develop into a more violent but unquestionably powerful machine!

The Minerva on the other hand noticeably became smarter and 'wiser', and that was not just because her partner was clever to begin with. The loaded name conveyed a lot of preconceived notions and the living expert mech tried her best to live up to those expectations.

As far as names went, Mephisto was such a classical evil name in human culture that it had been used and reused for millenia. Countless different books, theater plays and drama shows utilized the name and identity of Mephisto to represent different forms of evil.

Usually, Mephisto became associated with cunning and trickery rather than brute force. He was often depicted in many franchises as making deals with people who were ill-equipped to recognize the pitfalls of dealing with a devil.

Though Ves did not intend for his new fiend to become a literal deal-making devil, he wanted the new spiritual product to become smart and intelligent enough to lead the fiends that would come after.

There was no way his Ghost Project would be able to haunt an unsuspecting ship with only a single fiend!

It needed to become a hive that hosted multiple fiends that could terrorize the entire crew of a starship at the same time!

"I'm not sure how many fiends the Geist System can fit." Ves frowned in thought. "How many I can squeeze inside will depend on many different factors. If I want to maximize the amount of fiends that my Ghost Project can carry, then I will need to alter and adjust its design so that it can accommodate the maximum possible fiend vessels."

This introduced an additional complication to the design of his first expert stealth mech, but he did not mind it. He actually looked forward to figuring out how he could cover it with as many fiend vessels as possible without compromising its stealth capabilities.

What was important was that the Larkinson Clan gained a new and different expert mech that could plug many shortcomings.

The Ghost Project might not be the strongest machine in a frontal battle, but as long as it remained unnoticed, its many spiritual fiends could wreak havoc among the enemy, all without tripping any alarms!

"This will definitely be a killer solution against unsuspecting alien warships!" Ves grinned as he held the fiend statuette with pride.

"Mraw..." The gray cat swished her tail at a halting pace.

Helena showed a lot more ambivalence towards this development. The birth of Mephisto was both miraculous and horrifying. Not even the self-proclaimed Daughter of Death felt entirely comfortable with the creation of such a malevolent spirit!

Ves didn't care about all of that. All he thought about was that he finally formed a fitting incorporeal attack method for the confoundingly difficult Ghost Project!

Of course, in order to make sure he was right, he still had to conduct an important test.

He turned towards the worktable and tapped the interface device. "Let's test whether you can connect and direct Mephisto through this experimental device. I am almost certain what the outcome will be, but it is best if we can confirm my suspicions with an empirical result."

"Mraw mraw!"

"Oh, come on. Mephisto is practically our kid! He's harmless! Don't you see how docile and friendly he behaves in your presence?"

"Mraw!" The gray cat's tail shot straight!

They argued for a short time before Helena reluctantly cooperated with the experiment.

This time, everything proceeded extremely smoothly. None of the problems that caused the previous experiments to turn into abject failures happened again.

Not only did Mephisto welcome Helena's influence with open arms, he also appeared to feed off and gain power from his precursor!

"Look! Look! Isn't he cute, Helena? He is growing so quickly from the energy that you are channeling through the interface. It's as if you are breastfeeding your baby for the first time."

"MRAAAAAAAAAAAW!"

"Ouch! Hey, stop trying to eat off my face with your teeth! Ahhhhh!"

Chapter 4665: Forcing Reality

Ever since Ves produced his big breakthrough by creating a new variety of spiritual products that he called 'spiritual fiends', his work on the Ghost Project proceeded a lot more briskly than before.

The Geist System that both he and Cormaunt Hempkamp had remained stuck on for a long amount of time no longer hindered their progress.

Like a dam that had just been broken, Ves and Cormaunt made lots of progress into advancing the development of the Geist System!

As the days continued to pass by, Ves kept ignoring his wife's persistent attempts to persuade him to fund her 120 million MTA merit cranial implant and continued to spend long hours in his design lab and personal workshop.

Initially, Cormaunt Hempkamp did not exactly react well to the introduction of the metal statuette that was shaped like a devil that was ready to bring death and ruination upon the innocent!

It did look unpleasant, but that was exactly why it was suitable for the Ghost Project. The expert mech wasn't meant to be nice and a spiritual fiend like Mephisto was exactly what it needed in order to produce powerful results in the field!

Cormaunt needed a few days of constant exposure to acclimatize himself to Mephisto's existence.

Once the neural interface specialist figured out that Ves had a good grip on the spiritual fiend and that the diabolical monster wasn't about to go out of control, Cormaunt did his best to work this new development into the technical side of the Geist System.

They soon came to the point where they needed to conduct another major test in order to create another important pillar of the Geist System.

"From my understanding, this 'Mephisto' is too weak and incapable to harass and assassinate people, right?" The dark-skinned man queried his superior.

Ves nodded. "Yup, that's right. I haven't conducted any tests due to the justifiable hazards that might bring, but I know what I am talking about. Far stronger entities than Mephistos aren't that much better in this aspect."

"Can't you just make him grow a lot stronger and see where that might lead?"

"It's not as simple as you think." Ves shook his head. "Leaving aside the enormous amount of energy that I have to supply somehow, there are quantitative limits to how much a life form like Mephisto can grow. He will have to undergo a qualitative evolution to raise his maximum limit, and that is incredibly troublesome. Even then, any notable improvement will only cause him to develop a stronger glow, one that might be powerful enough to make people more afraid or tired, but that is hardly the kind of disruption that I have in mind for the Ghost Project."

Cormaunt looked at the half-completed prototype of the Geist System that he was mostly responsible for cobbling together. "This is where this gadget comes in, then. From the moment you formulated the Geist System, you came up with the theory that Object 335 is capable of giving substance and strength to your 'fiends'."

"That's correct. We need a solution that can make fiends like Mephisto affect our material reality while still maintaining all of their intangible and other metaphysical traits. It is the blending of the two that is key to making them effective on stealth missions and active battlefield deployments. By using the force of will of an expert pilot to distort the reality of Mephisto's state of being, we can turn an impossibility into a possibility."

It was like forcing reality to acknowledge that $2 + 2 = 4$ as well as $2 + 2 = -4$ at the same time! Although this was an extremely exaggerated example, Ves did not think the principle was much different in the case of what he was trying to bring into existence.

However, this was one of the riskiest hurdles of the Ghost Project. The consequences of failure were greater than normal.

A negative result could not only disprove a theory or reveal that the Geist System's current implementation was not viable, but it could also harm the two living parties involved in this radical new piece of tech!

An outcome similar to Helena's first attempts to connect with a generic spiritual product might occur.

If Mephisto popped like a balloon, then Ves would definitely feel the loss as the spiritual fiend was the first of his kind. There was no way that subsequent spiritual fiends that may be better put together would carry the same emotional weight and associations.

On the other hand, the Geist System might also produce an adverse effect on Object 335. The value of the head of a decapitated expert pilot was enormous and may even be irreplaceable.

Master Huron and the Fridaymen somehow managed to gain permission to cut off the head of an old and feeble expert pilot only to turn it into a twisted attempt to reproduce a living weapon.

That didn't mean that Ves could obtain the same permission!

As such, once Ves broke Object 335, it was highly unlikely that he could obtain an exact substitute without committing another war crime!

Though Ves believed that the Geist System could be retooled to make it work without relying on Object 335, that would take way too much time and effort.

For now, he wanted to proceed with the Geist System in its current conception.

"Let's conduct a live test." Ves announced. "We have completed just enough of the Geist System to make it possible. We don't need to do anything elaborate. Just a short test run should be enough to tell us whether my theory is right. We can fine tune all of the other variables such as strength, range and control another time."

Now that he had made this decision, he went ahead and retrieved Object 335.

Due to the sensitive and organic nature of this treasure, Ves had made the Larkinson Biotech Institute responsible for keeping it in good condition.

It took a moderate delay for a shuttle to be dispatched that carried the precious cargo over to the Spirit of Bentheim.

Once a team delivered the creation that not only held Object 335 but also an expanded life support system to keep the decapitated human head in good health, Ves inspected it carefully before he saw that everything was in good condition.

"We can proceed. Let's bring it all to an experimental chamber that I have reserved for this test."

Hooking up Object 335 to the prototype Geist System was anything but simple. What they were doing was unprecedented to begin with so Ves and Cormaunt both had to develop new solutions on the spot.

They finally managed to make the right adjustments and attach a number of cables between the two critical devices.

After implementing a few safety measures, the pair of Journeymen retreated to an observation room and set everything up on their end.

"I am done on my end." Cormaunt told his boss. "I have just tested the transmission quality of the physical connections between the two devices. Everything in my area of responsibility is operating at close to optimal conditions. I can't say much about the stuff you are overseeing, but the physical parts should not fail during the test."

"That is good to hear. Everything should be good on my end as well. Hit the button!"

As soon as the Geist System came online, Ves utilized his spiritual senses to check whether the prototype machine maintained a working connection to the fiend vessel he had installed on one of its slots.

The statuette containing Mephisto remained unchanged and unaffected, but this was just the beginning.

"Move on to the next phase."

This was one of the most crucial steps of the experiment. This was where the Geist System connected to Object 335.

"Connection established! I am picking up anomalous readings! I think... I think that expert pilot's willpower is generating activity that some of our sensors are faintly picking up! The activity is well within the safety boundaries that we have set for the time being."

"Commence the third phase!"

This was the most important step. The Geist System currently established one connection to Mephisto and a separate connection to Object 335.

Right now, the latter two did not establish any direct contact, but that was soon about to change!

As Ves and Cormaunt inputted the necessary commands and closely observed the data as well as what was taking place in the experimental chamber, a number of drastic events took place!

First, the force of will generated by Object 335 became agitated! The space around the large life support module seemed to wobble, showing that the Fridayman expert pilot that had been reduced to a tool was experiencing a lot of upheaval.

Second, Mephisto became subjected to a lot of pressure that caused the young and immature spiritual fiend to experience a lot of pain!

Though Ves sympathized with Mephisto, there was nothing much he could do. The connection had already been toned down to a point where it was difficult to make it weaker without losing effect entirely.

The spiritual fiend needed to get through this test the hard way.

One of the factors that complicated Mephisto's ability to pass this test was that Object 335 obviously did not like what was taking place!

The state of the Fridayman expert pilot was a bit weird to describe. Though he remained dormant for the most part, his strong and indomitable will that had not been weakened too much by everything he experienced was still conscious to a degree!

Thus, the active willpower of a once-powerful expert pilot strenuously objected to being forced to maintain a connection with a spiritual fiend and generated plenty of hostility and resistance!

This manifested most clearly by the pain and suffering that Mephisto experienced at the moment.

However, as a creature that was based on death energy and had been designed with causing suffering in mind, the pain did not break the spiritual fiend.

Ves slowly felt more reassured as he saw that Mephisto fully lived up to his expectations.

Not only did the spiritual product prevent himself from succumbing to the pain, but he also formed enough resistance against the foreign will to avoid getting subsumed!

Though Mephisto's state was anything but calm, the equilibrium that the two had managed to form remained stable more or less.

The only reason why Mephisto started to twitch and act a bit out of control was due to his immaturity and inexperience.

"Wait. What is happening? Is that.. Mephisto?!" Cormaunt called out from his station.

"You can see him?" Ves questioned.

"Yeah. He's right there. I can see a ghost poking out of the statue that shares his shape!"

Ves did not intend for the Geist System to make the spiritual fiends visible while empowering them at the same time, but he could work out the kinks at a later date.

Right now, he wanted to see whether Mephisto became a far greater threat than before!

The pained and twitching ghost flickered around as if he couldn't pay attention to his surroundings. His sharp mouth snapped as if he badly wanted to eat something to distract him from his agony.

When Mephisto tipped over and began to hit the floor of the experimental chamber, he experienced no physical resistance as he phased through the bottom.

However, as he bit a portion of the metal floor panel, Ves shot up straight when the sensors noted that Mephisto inflicted a faint amount of damage!

The difference was miniscule. When Ves accessed a sensor feed and zoomed in at a powerful degree of magnification, he could spot an extremely faint row of indentations that corresponded to Mephisto's needle-like teeth.

Even though the extent of the damage was so tiny, the fact that Mephisto under his current state managed to affect the material realm at all was a massive breakthrough!

"We did it!" Ves shouted in jubilation! "We did it! The experiment is a success! We managed to prove that the Geist System conceptually works! All we need to do is refine our implementation and magnify the effects so that the full version is strong enough to become useful in the field!"

This was a massive advancement for not just the Ghost Project, but any future mech designs that utilized a similar solution!

Chapter 4666: That's Different

Now that Ves received the outcome he wanted to produce, there was not much point to letting the prototype Geist System run any longer.

The more time passed by, the more things could go wrong. It was not necessary for Ves to take any further risks with the new system.

"Shut down the connection!" Ves quickly instructed the other Journeyman. "We've got the result that we needed. Now let's pull Mephisto back before he starts to do his job on my ship instead of an enemy target!"

The magnitude of the effect was not as important. Ves already accounted for the possibility that the dinky setup he and his collaboration partner had cobbled together wouldn't produce any drastic results.

Besides, he had limited the strength of the connection at the lowest viable level. Ves did not have any desire to dial it up for fear of overwhelming a new and relatively fragile spiritual fiend.

The finished version of the Geist System should be capable of accomplishing a lot more. Not only would it be paired with lots of stronger spiritual fiends that had more time to mature, it would also be larger and made out of more high-end parts and materials!

If that wasn't enough, then once Venerable Zimro Belson and his completed expert stealth mech finally combined together, the true resonance that they could produce should grant the Geist System and its numerous fiends a huge power boost!

The effect should be similar to how Commander Casella Ingvar was able to Commandeer friendly Larkinson mechs and mech pilots, thereby granting them a substantial boost in combat effectiveness.

The only difference was that Venerable Zimro was only able to do that with the fiends attached to his expert mech with the help of the Geist System instead of an inherent quality of his willpower.

In other words, Ves essentially managed to reproduce the effect of Commander Casella's domain in a limited and more specialized form!

"How wonderful. This is a true innovation!"

The hardest part was over now. Almost every subsequent step in the Ghost Project should be a straight path forward. It would not be long before Ves and Cormaunt would be able to complete this project and introduce another expert mech to the Larkinson Clan!

Ves eagerly analyzed the data and obtained tentative confirmation that his theories had mostly been proved.

He still needed to conduct follow-up experiments where he tested the same circumstances before changing up the variables in order to obtain a more robust answer that could stand up to scientific scrutiny.

However, since Ves was working for himself, he had no great need to conduct a proper scientific study. He believed in his work and he understood the mechanics well enough to know that his promised Geist System would definitely perform well once the Ghost Project was complete!

As the days went by, Ves eventually had to update his wife on his progress with the Ghost Project.

Though Gloriana was nominally involved in the Ghost Project as well due to the fact that it was an expert mech, she spent more time on the Greenaxe Project and the Bloodripper Project due to various reasons.

She was not that charmed with the Ghost Project and her responsibilities diverged a lot from whatever crazy stuff that Ves and Cormaunt had dedicated their time upon.

This was why she had fallen out of the loop with regards to the recent breakthroughs in the Ghost Project.

It took a bit of time before his wife returned from a longer-than-usual session in the design lab.

Ves had already returned to his grand stateroom and kept watch over the children who had ended their respective schooling a few hours earlier.

Despite the exceedingly high demands of their studies, the children hardly seemed to have lost any energy throughout the day!

"Hihihi!"

"Hihihihi!"

"Where's my cookie, Marvaine?!"

"Meow... meow..."

"Miaow miaow miaow!"

Kids were running around the living room while the cats played the role of babysitters and kept an eye on energetic brats.

"Beware the might of my dark sword!" Andraste dramatically shouted as she lifted up a swordsman Mekanos that her little brother had recently made.

Aurelia did not let her little sister keep the initiative and lifted up a pair of white tiger Mekanos in response!

"My twin tiger stars shall vanquish over your evil mech and restore the light to the galaxies!"

The two kids proceeded to bash their Mekanos against each other.

Of course, the toys made the appropriate noises, sound effects and movements as they simulated battle against each other.

When Gloriana finally entered through the hatch, the children all stopped their games and ran up to their mother and obediently presented themselves.

"Come here and let your mother give you a kiss. Have you been good today, again?"

"Yes, mama~"

As dinner was being prepared by a bunch of highly skilled chefs, Gloriana chatted with her lovely children for a few minutes before joining Ves at the couch.

Her scent wafted over to his nose. The woman studied her husband with a critical eye.

"You look inordinately satisfied at the moment. I know when you are in this kind of mood. You made a lot of progress, haven't you? Is it the Ghost Project that you are working on lately?"

He grinned at her. "Yup. The Ghost Project will definitely be finished. I can guarantee you that. We can't be stopped anymore now that we have overcome the hardest technical challenges of our upcoming expert mech design."

Ves quickly filled her in on the Geist System, Mephisto and a bunch of other fiends he had created since.

The most interesting part about the fiends was that not all of them were made out of Helena's spare death energy.

In the interest of expanding the versatility and arsenal of the Ghost Project, Ves had experimented with creating fiends by utilizing spiritual energy derived from other sources as the base.

He only wanted to make use of fiends derived from a negative energy type, so he did not have many eligible donors to draw his ingredients from. Aside from Helena, only the Superior Mother's darker aspects met the standard.

Every other design spirit under his collection either possessed neutral or positive spiritual attributes.

Not even his third order living mechs or the companion spirits he made for various people provided him with another source of negative energy attribute.

This was not that surprising as Ves preferred to deal with friendly and trustworthy partners instead of entities that would stab him in the back if they had the chance.

Still, the lack of 'dark' design spirits exposed a gap in his design spirit collection that might become a critical weakness in the future.

For now, Ves made due to by making a bunch of fiends derived from mostly neutral spiritual energy.

The resulting spiritual entities were not as nasty or dangerous as Mephisto, but they came with a bag of tricks that introduced new ways to mess with enemies!

As Gloriana listened to his astonishing progress and many new discoveries, she exhibited a mix of reactions.

Once Ves ended his story so that he could give his wife a chance to offer her feedback, she needed a moment to compose her thoughts into words.

"I... half-hoped that you would hit a wall so often that you would see sense." She eventually spoke. "When you initially conceived of the Geist System, I found that it was too much even now that I have become accustomed to your habit of going off on weird and unusual tangents. Everything that you have told me so far does not not reassure me much. These fiends of yours sound dangerous! What if they slip out of the shackles that you have put onto them? They can easily pose a threat against our clan if they are able to wreak havoc in our fleet!"

Ves leaned over and put his hand on her palm. "Relax, honey. I have already accounted for those possibilities. The tech is risky, but so is a plasma cannon. We can't make progress if we aren't willing to push the limits. The fiends that I have made won't get loose because they are inherently anchored to their fiend vessels. If these specialized totems ever get destroyed, the fiends won't get loose, but they will likely die or disappear as they have lost their hold on reality. I have expressly designed them to remain dependent on their fiend vessels as a way to anchor them to reality as well as create an easy means of control."

"What if your assumption is wrong? What if these fiends act similarly to design spirits and are able to subside away from your reach? What then, Ves?"

"I have implemented a few more safeguards to increase the chances that they will remain beholden to us or their precursor. I can't make any guarantees as life has a way of evolving into different forms, but even if the worst has happened, it is not as if we are under immediate threat. These fiends are purely spiritual entities, and without willpower or true resonance empowerment, they can hardly do anything in the material realm."

Gloriana remained critical. "What if they found a way to evolve around that problem? I know it sounds unlikely, but go along with me please."

Ves smirked and leaned back on the couch. "Even if these fiends pose a threat to others, they will never be able to assail our clan. We have a lot of protection in this area. I made sure of that early on. Goldie is our main line of defense against any spiritual intrusions. If her strength isn't enough, we can call upon many other design spirits such as Qilanzo and the Solemn Guardian. On top of that, we can always call upon our third order living mechs or our expert mechs. Both of them should have the means to beat up spiritual fiends or any other nefarious spiritual entities for that matter. I did not create living weapons that I can't even defend against. That would be stupid."

The Geist System and everything attached to it still sounded iffy to Gloriana, but it was not as if she could deter Ves from making use of it. When he was in this mood, he would proceed with an experimental solution regardless of how much she and everyone else complained.

Compared to telling Ves to rein in his risk taking, Gloriana would rather discuss a more relevant topic with her husband.

"Have you reconsidered my proposal yet?" She asked. "You definitely have enough MTA merits left over after you have allocated spending on refitting the Spirit of Bentheim and a few other useful acquisitions. Why aren't you buying a new cranial implant for me yet? It is only 120 million MTA merits, which should be easy for you to earn back since you insist on heading back to the frontier soon!"

"Not this again..." Ves grumbled.

"Don't dismiss me again, Ves!" She barked back in frustration as she held onto his uniform shirt. "I am telling you that you are missing out on the most promising investment that you can make in the clan! Pay for my new implant and I will earn it all back within five years or less! In fact, I will do even better. I will double the merits you have spent because I am confident I will advance to Senior and develop a fantastic design application by then!"

"Uh huh."

"What do you mean, 'uh huh'? You are not the only mech designer in the clan who can develop fantastic new innovations that the MTA appreciates! I would like to inform you that I am in regular contact with the Mech Supremacist Faction!"

"If you are so great, then why don't you work hard and earn the required MTA merits on your own?" Ves retorted. "Besides, if you really can't wait, you can make use of the MTA merits earned by the Glory Seekers. They are yours, right?"

"That's not an option! The Glory Seekers have earned the smallest share of the three alliance partners. They are already weak and they need to invest all of their MTA merits into strengthening their forces. My brother Brutus and the other Glory Seeker expert pilots all need the merits more in order to keep up with our future growth. Besides, you're my husband, Ves. You are the one that is supposed to be pampering me, so open up your merit account already!"

He looked at her with an odd expression. "That is a surprisingly paternalistic statement, honey. Aren't Hexer women supposed to be strong and independent woman who don't need no man to provide for their needs?"

"THAT'S DIFFERENT!"

Chapter 4667: On A Roll

Gloriana still failed to gain any traction from her husband. Her latest attempts to squeeze 120 million MTA merits from him continued to fall on flat ears.

That did not do their relationship any favors. Gloriana was more likely to glower or huff at Ves than to act lovey dovey around him during the journey back to Davute.

Fortunately, the mood in their little family remained harmonious for the most part due to the need to put up a good front in the presence of their children.

Neither Ves nor Gloriana wanted to spread any of their ugliness to their cute and innocent munchkins.

As such, the couple managed to maintain a cordial atmosphere whenever they were near their children. They were aware that they needed to set a good example for their kids and prevent them from developing any weird ideas as they grew older.

As the expeditionary fleet had already left the turbulent and dangerous border region without any incident and came closer to reaching the Davute System, Ves continued to spend his time on numerous projects and his children.

Out of all of the design projects that he was at least sporadically involved in, he temporarily set aside many of his assignments in order to concentrate all of his creative and design energies on a single mech design.

"I need to strike while the iron is hot!"

Ves was on a roll ever since he produced the critical breakthroughs he needed to realize his ambitious vision for the Ghost Project!

Buoyed by the rush of success, Ves became more enflamed by passion than ever!

Each time he worked on the expert mech design project, the design solutions came easier and he began to work a lot more fluently than before.

Every design session caused him to enter into the flow where all distractions blurred away. His state of mind entered into a half-transcendent state that approached the experience of hitting himself with his hammer!

In many cases, he wasn't even fully conscious in the strictest definition of the word.

Instead, his mind drifted to a new height where his mind roamed in the clouds while his subconscious self practically went on autopilot and performed all of the nitty gritty design work.

Despite not thinking explicitly about his design tasks, the work he produced during each and every session fully satisfied his requirements!

In a number of cases, the design solutions he half-consciously formulated during his passion-fueled work sessions were so good that he could have never performed so well if he was more attentive.

"I need to keep this up as long as possible!"

Ves experienced this powerful state of mind several times throughout his career. He understood how precious it was and how many benefits it could bring to his work. When everything was on a roll, it would be the height of foolishness to stop this pattern in its tracks or squander it by splitting his focus on other projects!

Though many of his other design and research projects had to take a backseat while he obsessed over the Ghost Project, he figured that the benefits far outweighed the downsides.

Venerable Jannzi already spent months waiting for the completion of the Dullahan Project. She could make do with waiting a little longer.

Ves was still confident he could complete it within the original deadline that he had set at the start because he did not account for his recent sublimation and boost in productivity.

When he met with the recovering expert pilot, he also gave her another reason for the delay.

"We are in the process of converting and retooling your expert mech's structure and armor system so that they can be built out of the large quantities of high-quality first-class materials that we have salvaged from the alien battleship." He told his cousin.

Venerable Jannzi had already heard a lot of stories about the valuable salvage and how the clan intended to make good use of the expensive materials.

"Does that mean my reborn Shield of Samar will become a first-class mech?"

"Not a true first-class mech, no." Ves shook his head. "That would force the MTA to reclassify our clan as a first-class pioneering organization, which means we have to operate in an upper zone which we are clearly not ready for. For now, our plan is to upgrade the defenses and the melee weapons of every existing expert mech to first-class standards. Everything else such as the power reactor, the circuitry, the flight system and so on will become more powerful as well, but should firmly remain within the boundaries of second-class mechs. That should be just enough for us to stay within our current strength category."

The Larkinson Clan intended to follow the letter but not the spirit of the rules, and that came with substantial risks.

There was always a possibility that the MTA would become so tired of the shenanigans committed by the Larkinsons that it would forcefully elevate the clan into a first-class pioneering organization!

"That means my expert mech will straddle the line between second-class and first-class." Venerable Jannzi spoke. "At least you chose to upgrade the most important parts. A defensive machine needs stellar protection."

Ves smiled in agreement. "Many other performance parameters won't be able to keep up, but I am sure that won't bother you that much. It is only when you are fighting against real first-class mechs that you will begin to experience the disparity. Make no mistake. There is still a substantial gap between quasi-first-class and real first-class multipurpose mechs. The latter's strongest advantage is not its high-quality materials, but how well they utilize their building blocks to integrate a large quantity of powerful weapon modules and other high-performing components."

"You don't need to remind me of that. I have used my free time to expand my horizons and learn more about the threats that our clan may be facing in the future."

"That is... quite productive of you." Ves remarked. "I hope to put you back in the saddle soon, but we need time to present you with a good machine that can accompany you for a long time. Right now, our clan does not have sufficient experience with working with first-class exotics. Sara Voiken is especially burdened as she needs to spend a lot of time on absorbing new knowledge that can help her process and shape the more powerful materials for the armor systems of many different ongoing mech design projects."

The Design Department currently depended heavily on Sara Voiken to design optimal armor systems for all of its armor systems.

This was far too iffy to Ves as it took a lot of time to design a single proper armor system for a mech design. The more powerful the materials, the more time it took to make the best use out of their properties.

Combined with the fact that the Design Department had expanded over the years and worked on many more mech design projects at the same time, it was inevitable for Sara Voiken to become the greatest and most persistent bottleneck to every mech design in development!

"It sounds like you need to bring on another mech designer who excels at defense." The female expert pilot noted.

"It is on my agenda. I am open to hiring any talented Journeyman that can share the burden with Sara Voiken. It won't be easy, though. Our standards have grown and the supply of young Journeyman Mech Designers is inherently small because many other organizations are much better at scouting them and recruiting them. Others are too confident in their abilities to subordinate themselves to another mech designer, especially a fellow Journeyman."

That did not sound like good news to Jannzi. "Will there be any problems?"

"It depends. I think I will have to tour a couple of mech design contests in order to meet and observe other talented Journeymen. That is how I managed to reel in Sara Voiken in the first place."

Mech design contests and other events centered around the profession were great opportunities to find promising new additions to the Design Department.

The reason why Ves hadn't been able to attend them as of late was because he was stuck on ship most of the time.

Though virtual events provided a way for distant people like Ves to gather together with mech designers regardless of locations, they never really felt real enough to the participants.

Perhaps the new Hyper Chamber that came with the upcoming refit of the Spirit of Bentheim might be enough to close the gap to an extent, but nothing beat a real face-to-face meeting.

Ves should make good use of the months he intended to spend in Davute!

After making it clear that Jannzi needed to wait a little longer and that her patience would pay off in the end, Ves continued to devote much of his time on progressing the Ghost Project.

All of the effort that he put into the project delivered a lot of results. He and Cormaunt cooperated so well that the Geist System had essentially reached completion.

Though the fully functional version of the first completed iteration of the Geist System could not be tested until the expert mech itself was done, Ves and Cormaunt both had great confidence in the effectiveness and reliability of their brilliant work.

"While I only played second fiddle to you, I can't help but feel prouder and more accomplished than I have in years." The neural interface specialist told Ves in a sentimental tone. "I never imagined that I would not only work on an innovative and mind-blowing new attack system, but also get to work on it with the full support and approval of my employer."

"Are you grateful for joining our clan?" Ves grinned.

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else, sir. It is work like this that makes me realize how much more progress we can all make in your Design Department. Those idiots who eagerly flock to the companies led by Masters don't know what they are missing out on. Sure, we all need to rely more on our own efforts in order to keep up with everyone, but at least we have the freedom to explore our own ideas."

There were advantages and disadvantages to working at a large and established company. Ves did not look down on the mech designers who opted for the safe and secure career route.

Still, the reason why a smaller outfit like the LMC's Design Department became so productive and successful was due to the strict recruiting standards of its lead designers. Ves essentially stacked the deck and made it easy for his relatively small company to outperform much larger and unwieldy ones.

That would definitely change in the future. The Design Department was constantly short-handed and constantly needed more mech designers, both to work on the major projects that introduced completely new mech designs to the lineup and the minor projects that mostly centered around developing variants of existing works.

In any case, Ves and the others could deal with that issue once the fleet settled back into Davute and gained access to its large and growing base of job seekers.

"Let's get back to work."

He shifted his attention to another important system of the Ghost Project.

The configuration of the expert stealth mech rested on two pillars. Its Geist System was its defining feature and the element that set it apart from every other machine in its category.

However, the most basic and fundamental requirement of any stealth mech was its ability to disappear into view!

Without an active stealth or cloaking system, there was no meaning for it to be called this way!

"Adding an active stealth system to the Ghost Project shouldn't be too difficult, but the real challenge is to make sure to equip it with a really good one instead of a mediocre off-the-shelf product." Ves frowned in thought.

Obtaining a stealth system that performed close to first-class standards was easier said than done!

Chapter 4668: War Losers

Since Ves wanted to equip the Ghost Project with a high-end transphasic stealth system, preferably one made out of the salvaged first-class materials that his clan still had in stock, he could not develop one from scratch.

Not even his recent improvements in the understanding of both active stealth systems and phasewater technology allowed him to develop a cloaking solution that was up to standard!

He glanced at a projection that listed the specifications of the Arcan & Bolt Racca RLT3 Transphasic Stealth System that he had selected at the start of the design project.

"This doesn't cut it anymore." He muttered as he swiped the projection away in disgust. "I need to obtain a higher-end product."

This was not easy. Stealth systems were inherently sensitive. Their effectiveness could best be guaranteed if they circulated as little as possible.

For that reason, a lot of developers who worked on stealth systems tended to work directly for states and other large organizations. They rarely released their products on the market as that would give the enemies of their current clients working examples that could be cracked and deciphered far sooner than they should!

Numerous large and powerful clients paid great sums of money in order to make sure that the relevant development companies remained discrete. The latter rarely had any desire to break this cozy arrangement and seek external customers for their stealth-oriented work.

Fortunately for Ves, exceptions always existed. It was mostly the new and innovative upstarts as well as the struggling companies in decline that opened up their business to new clients.

There were many risks and downsides to working with shabbier developers, but it was not as if the Larkinson Clan had any better options.

All of the recent successes and reputation boosts would do wonders in opening up new business opportunities with small-to-medium enterprises, but the benefits they provided had clear limits.

What Ves truly needed was for his clan to break into the upper circles of frontier society. The new aristocrats and rulers who dreamt about founding their own states were the true movers and shakers in the Red Ocean.

These bigshots reserved all of the best goods for themselves. Essentially, anything that managed to enter the market were usually not good enough by their standards.

"This is going to be an issue." He frowned.

It was unlikely for him to be able to gain access to the premier, cutting-edge, military-grade stealth products that the best development companies in Davute reserved for the local giants.

He would have to make use of his network and enlist the aid of his various friends and business partners to see whether he could obtain a useful referral.

Of course, Ves could easily skip all of this trouble and obtain the rights to use a powerful active stealth system if he knocked on the doors of the MTA.

That would probably require him to spend a lot of MTA merits, however. He already allocated so much spending that he was reluctant to pay more for tech that he should be able to obtain in exchange for normal remuneration!

"Don't spend merits when I can obtain what I need with credits." Ves reminded himself of this essential rule.

Earning gigantic sums of MTA merits made it all too easy for him to lose sight of how difficult and dangerous it was to earn them in the first place.

It was incredibly tempting for Ves to solve many of the problems he encountered by spending 10,000 MTA merits here and 100,000 MTA merits there. The Association had so many goods and services on offer that he would soon be down 20 million MTA merits or more if he slipped up and gave in to temptation!

Ves vigorously shook his head in order to clear his thoughts. "There is no immediate hurry to implement an active stealth system to the Ghost Project. Much of its internal architecture is still incomplete, so I have plenty of other work to do. I can wait until I have found a suitable business partner that can supply me with a high-tech product that meets my criteria."

As his work on the Ghost Project continued, the other lead designers of the Larkinson Clan made brisk progress as well.

Although the expert mech design projects all had to be revised mid-way in order to take advantage of the large and varied stock of salvaged first-class materials, the standard mech design projects encountered no such hindrance.

Many of them such as the Eye Project and the Samurai Project were meant to produce standard mech designs that needed to be affordable.

Once the Larkinson Clan obtained more batches of first-class materials, it may be interesting to develop quasi-first-class variants of their ordinary Larkinson-exclusive mech models, but Ves was in no hurry. He much preferred his fellow mech designers to finish what they started before pursuing any new ideas.

As time continued to pass by, the Larkinsons achieved a lot of progress in other areas.

As Ves began to feel his highly inflamed state beginning to wane, he regained his interest into other initiatives that were relevant to himself and his clan.

The biggest issue aside from his projects that concerned him was the ongoing effort to screen and select suitable candidates to expand the Golden Skull Alliance.

Though face-to-face meetings were not yet possible, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had managed to make substantial progress in exploring the viability of bringing the Adelaides and the Boojays into the fold!

"Everything is going well on our end." Minister Shederin Purnesse calmly reported to the patriarch. "Both us and the other two parties have more than enough willingness to work together, so no one is playing hardball. The main reason why it will still take months to settle our terms is because of the size and complexity of our respective organizations. The more profound the changes, the more issues we need to settle in advance. Thorough planning and negotiation can spare us a great amount of future pain."

Ves waved his hand. "I understand. I am not being too impatient. As you have said, since both sides of the negotiation table want to combine forces, we will get it done sooner or later, barring any unpleasant revelations. Calabast?"

The spymaster who attended the meeting as well began her report. "We are still in the process of digging deeper into the history and background of the Adelaide Mercenary

Company and the Boojay Family, but so far we have yet to find any immediate points of concern."

It was essential to conduct extensive background checks on the people and organizations that Ves might trust his back to one day.

He transferred 10,000 MTA credits to the Black Cats solely for the purpose of digging as deep into the history of two familiar candidates as possible.

"As you know, it is much more difficult for us to explore the origins of the Adelaides and Boojays." Calabast reported. "None of my Black Cats can travel back to the old galaxy and transit to the star clusters they used to operate before becoming pioneering organizations. My subordinates had to rely on second-hand and third-hand information, many times procured through local middle-men, in order to collect information that goes deeper than what is obvious on the surface."

All of that cost a lot of money, but the Larkinson Clan still had plenty to spare due to all of the plunder it received as of late.

If not for the fact that Ves wanted his clan to digest as much of the high-quality salvage as possible, it would be easy to earn millions of MTA credits on the open market!

This was a reflection of the high-risk, high-reward approach of going on expeditions. Far too many pioneers were too afraid of the risks to dare stepping out of a safe star system like Davute. There was no way they could get their hands on valuable salvage with as much ease as the Golden Skull Alliance!

Although 10,000 MTA credits did not amount to a massive sum to the Larkinson Clan these days, it was still a fortune in many second-rate states in the old galaxy!

The Black Cats managed to learn quite a few secrets after paying enough bribes!

"Let's start with the Adelaides." Calabast said as she projected a map of the old galaxy that highlighted a specific star cluster. "The Adelaide Mercenary Company's roots lie within a second-rate state in the galactic heartland. It used to be a mech regiment that participated in a losing war. Suffice to say, the state not only lost the war, but got carved up, thereby ceasing to exist. This left a lot of traumatized and disillusioned in the lurch. The mech regiment in question was one of many who utilized whatever starships they had left to pick up what family they could and quickly run away before someone tries to reclaim their mechs and starships."

"Hm, so they started out as defeated soldiers." Ves hummed. "That explains how professional they are. Tell me more."

"Since the soldiers not only lost their state, but also their belief in military service, they thought it was best to work for themselves. They founded the Adelaide Mercenary

Company and started to hire themselves out to anyone willing and able to pay for a core of highly skilled, battle-tested war veterans. Though the Adelaide mechs were a bit worn at the start, they were still more than strong enough to beat softer mercenary outfits in battle."

The Adelaides slowly regained their footing by completing numerous mercenary missions. The problem was that they failed to earn enough money to cover their heavy expenditures.

Ves nodded in understanding when he heard this. "A military mech regiment generally demands a lot of upkeep. States have higher standards and their large tax bases allow them to pay more attention to quality rather than maximizing the cost effectiveness of their mech units."

"Well, the Adelaides figured out that they were going deeper into debt. They urgently needed to reverse this trend, and they eventually found a way to do so by accepting a different type of mercenary contract that is much more dangerous but also a lot more lucrative."

"And that is...?"

"War contracts." Calabast answered. "When states under war need extra help but lack the military mech units to do certain jobs, they are not entirely opposed to the idea of hiring mercenaries. Of course, states must be highly discerning about the selection of mercenary outfits and the missions they will have to perform. Still, war is an activity that the Adelaides were highly familiar with, so they felt right at home when they started to complete these lucrative missions."

Ves found this rather ironic. "The Adelaides became homeless because of war, but also found their salvation in war."

"It is not as bad as it sounds. The Adelaides did not fight on the frontline alongside strangers for a cause that did not involve the mercenaries. Instead, the war contracts they accepted in their early history mostly amounted to second-line or rear-line assignments. Think about protecting a vulnerable industrial planet in the rear, or occupying an enemy planet that has recently been conquered and just been pacified. Occasionally, war contracts also involve raiding shipping lines or harassing the underdefended provinces of an opposing state. By letting mercenaries take care of these lesser jobs, a mech military can concentrate all of its crack troops on the more essential missions."

"I see. That can be a good arrangement as long as the mercenaries don't screw up." Ves thoughtfully spoke. "I take it that the Adelaides didn't exactly keep their records clean during these missions. War zones can become incredibly chaotic, and soldiers can lose their scruples in the heat of the moment."

Calabast nodded in confirmation. "That is exactly what happened on a number of these missions. Their inherent risk means that the Adelaide Mercenary Company could not avoid setbacks and losses. There were situations where the Adelaides lost their cool and committed actions that they regretted in hindsight. Some are so egregious that they can even be classified as war crimes!"

Any mercenary who remained in the business long enough eventually became stained by the filth of the job.

It was impossible for a long-running mercenary company to remain squeaky clean!

Chapter 4669: Simple Mercenaries

"That's it?" Ves asked.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Did the Adelaides commit any other unforgivable sins during their early history? Did they betray their clients or give up their missions without good cause?"

"The Adelaides might not always be clean, but they often get the job done, at least that is what we have heard. They have rarely failed their missions and never without proper cause."

Ves smiled in relief. "That sounds good. That means that they still made an effort to cling onto their integrity during those difficult times."

The Black Cats managed to uncover a lot of incident reports about the affairs where the Adelaide Mercenary committed wrongs. A part of them had even been buried in a forgotten classified archive!

While all of this sounded like interesting reading material, Ves didn't have the time or inclination to dig that deep into the Adelaide Mercenary Company's ancient history.

Ves tapped a finger against his head in thought. "From what I have witnessed of the Adelaides of today, none of them carry the impression of cynical war dogs whose trigger fingers have become a little too itchy. A major transition took place along the way, am I correct?"

Calabast nodded. "The Adelaide Mercenary Company was one of the few mercenary organizations that was capable of fielding expert mechs. They had also done a good job at training new ones and equipping them with expert mechs developed by its business partners. Although the Adelaides had little choice at the beginning, once they gained a solid footing and secured their finances, they needed to address other priorities. Their

reputation in the mech community had declined and numerous expert pilots have expressed objections to the state of the mercenary company at the time."

"So the Adelaide Mercenary Company cleaned up its act as soon as it could afford to do so, am I right?"

"That is correct, Ves. This transition took decades, but the Adelaides had shown great patience and did not give up even if progress happened too slowly for most people to notice. By the time Marissa Lewandowski successfully advanced to ace pilot, the mercenaries have successfully completed their reforms and cleaned up their reputation. Most people don't pay special attention to mercenary companies and do not care so much about the misdeeds they committed a few generations ago. This combined with taking on much more lucrative and high-profile war contracts has allowed them to build a positive reputation."

In the end, the history of the Adelaides was not that special. The former military mech regiment turned mercenary company managed to climb their way up from their lowest point through a combination of persistence and adaptability.

Although the growth rate of the company was not that great, the fact that it managed to maintain a positive trend across multiple generations spoke of sound leadership and a commitment to long-term interests.

"So aside from committing a few war crimes in the heat of battle, the Adelaides don't have any other dirty laundry under the surface?" Ves questioned the spymaster.

"We have yet to find traces of any other objectionable or problematic stories related to their organization or activities, but we are still in the early stages of our investigations. Do not assume that the intelligence that I have presented to you is the complete picture. We are still in the process of digging into their internal hierarchy. We need to move much slower and more cautiously here, as getting caught may have serious implications for the ongoing negotiations."

"Got it, Calabast. Keep up the good work." Ves spoke before turning back to Minister Shederin. "Tell me about the leadership structure of the Adelaide Mercenary Company. So far, I only had personal contact with Mech General Herman Foraine. How much power does he wield and who else has a say in how the company is run?"

The minister smiled in an intriguing manner. "That is an interesting topic, sir. Most military mech units and commercial organizations tend to be led by a single leader who holds most of the authority. They may have to answer to shareholders or a civilian administration, but by and large they have a mandate that allows them to implement many decisions without needing to ask permission from above."

"And the Adelaide Mercenary Company is different?"

"Yes." Shederin nodded. "Back when the Adelaides only operated a single shabby fleet of deserters, it was easy for a single general to keep the entire unit in line. Once they started to expand and form multiple fleets, multiple mech generals emerged from the ranks. As these fleets often accepted different war contracts that caused them to be stationed far away from each other, these mech generals mostly focused on leading their own units and rarely intersected with the other fleets."

That indeed sounded interesting to Ves. "Since these mercenary fleets spend so much time away from each other, there is always a risk that they break away from the mother organization. Has that happened with the Adelaides?"

"Surprisingly, no. They have been remarkably good at instilling enough loyalty and belonging in their cadre to keep every fleet within the company. It also helps that their headquarters and back office handles much of the overhead and work that is common among all of the fleets."

"So who is actually in charge of the Adelaide Mercenary Company?" Ves asked.

"The Adelaide Mercenary Company should formally be classified as a cooperative, sir. It has no outside shareholders. Every fleet owns an equal share of the company. Whenever the company needs to make high-level decisions or set an overall strategic direction, all of the mech generals convene together in order to discuss and vote on different proposals. In theory, no mech general holds a greater voice than the rest, but in practice seniority and glory plays a major role in whose voice is greater."

That was natural. True equality did not exist. A company that was led by a council of true equals should have crashed and burned a long time ago due to lacking a single cohesive strategy.

As Ves thought about his meetings with Mech General Foraine, he felt that the man did not carry himself as a powerful member of the highest decision-making organ of a large and prosperous mercenary company.

"What's the deal with the Third Fleet and General Foraine?"

"The Third Fleet is obviously the third fleet to emerge under the Adelaides." Shederin explained. "It is neither the oldest or newest of the mercenary fleets, but it has managed to build a good record under its previous generals. Herman Foraine only took over leadership fairly recently. He is stepping into big shoes as his predecessor was both beloved and accomplished among his men."

"Oh. I see. He's the new guy, then. That must be tough for him then. Is he doing well up to this point?"

"Mech General Foraine has not shown any incompetence, and he has done decently well in acclimatizing to his new responsibilities. The issue is that he is still lacking in

accomplishments. The difficult environment of the Red Ocean has made it difficult for him to accept risky missions as the chances of meeting an excessively strong opponent is too great. He has been getting by with letting the Third Fleet or its detachments complete safer and less ambitious contracts. While that certainly pays the bills, it is not making his men excited. Taking part in Operation Lighthouse was the first major success of his fleet since his promotion."

Ves gained a better understanding of the position of General Foraine and his Third Fleet. It seemed that the poor man who had been thrust into a greater office had to prove himself, but was unable to do so on his own because it was too easy to get utterly crushed in the new frontier.

Joining the Golden Skull Alliance sounded like a logical solution. Whether the Adelaide Third Fleet only stuck around for a decade or stayed for the long haul, their new allies were bound to drag General Foraine's men into crazy and exciting expeditions!

The record of the Golden Skull Alliance was much more exciting and glorious than the Third Fleet under its current leader. This was enough to show that the former clearly knew what it was doing in the new frontier.

It made a lot more sense why the Adelaide Third Fleet desired to become a part of the Golden Skull Alliance.

The Adelaides clearly weren't afraid of danger, but they had not adapted too well to the new frontier.

By joining an alliance that had a proven record of success and also earned insane profits through its expeditions, General Foraine would be able to ride to success while not having to do anything but ensure that the mercenary soldiers under his command would fight when directed!

Although the Third Fleet clearly did not excel in any other areas such as planning, trade, industrial activities or research, there was no need to bring in anything else.

Just the ace mech along with a professional mech division that possessed a lot of experience in fighting in wars was enough to make the Golden Skull Alliance satisfied!

What Ves liked the most was that the Adelaides were unlikely to pose a threat to the alliance.

General Foraine was more interested in securing his position within the mercenary company than making any external power plays.

The Adelaide Mercenary Company also sounded like a collective that was fairly loose in the management of its individual mercenary fleets.

It should be easy to keep the Third Fleet happy. Mercenaries always liked profit, and it appeared the Adelaides also needed periodic stimulation and excitement in order to give their life meaning.

"I like what I am hearing so far, Shederin." Ves said with a smile. "That said, no organization is without its blemishes. What are the risks and downsides to allowing the Third Fleet to become a part of our alliance?"

"You are asking the right question. There are most definitely risks to bringing in the Adelaide Third Fleet. The most obvious risk factor is interference from the rest of the mercenary company. While General Foraine possesses a great amount of autonomy on how he can run his fleet, the council of generals can always overrule him and force him to act against the interests of our alliance."

"Do you think that is likely to happen?"

"Probably not." Shederin shook his head. "The Adelaides have always been honorable, especially in their later years. They greatly value their credibility and reputation as those are intangible assets that directly impact how well they can attract well-paying clients and negotiate more favorable terms with them. If the company at large ever wants the Third Fleet to stop associating with our alliance, you can at least expect the Adelaides to file the necessary paperwork and properly go through the lengthy exit process. They are extremely unlikely to stab us in the back in the middle of the battle."

"Even if they are mercenaries?"

"They may carry that label, but they are not truly mercenaries at heart, sir. They are more aptly described as stateless soldiers that are constantly looking to test themselves and earn glory in honorable and worthy fights. Their military DNA has slackened over the years, but they still cling to many of the essential traits of professional soldiers."

Calabast nodded as well. "I have found plenty of proof to support this description. The Adelaide Mercenary Company do not purely fight for profit and they are not opportunistic cowards who are eager to abandon their missions at the first sign of adversity. The recruits they have hired over the years along with the newer generations that have emerged from within have all embraced a culture where they don't have to think too much about the cause they are fighting for. As long as they can take part in good fights and win in the process, they will always remain happy."

"I see." Ves said. "That means that we only need to keep winning if we want to maintain their support."

Chapter 4670: Common Origin Story

"What about the Boojay Family?"

"The Boojay Family is an entirely different case from the Adelaide Mercenary Company, sir." Minister Shederin Purnesse calmly responded as he picked up a tea cup and sipped his specially brewed melange. "Did you know that the Boojays used to be Terran?"

The spices of his brew wafted over to the noses of Ves and Calabast, allowing them to enjoy a scent that harkened to a more exotic human culture.

Ves raised his eyebrow at what he heard, but that was the extent of his reaction. "Terran, huh? Well, our clan has a distant relation to the New Rubarth Empire. In fact, if you look deep enough in the past, then practically every human in the Milky Way and the Red Ocean has a relation to the ancient humans who lived on Old Earth. Having a connection to the oldest human state isn't that special these days. Let me guess, the Boojays were exiled from the Terran Confederation, right?"

"Correct. It is not that hard to guess." Minister Shederin acknowledged. "What you need to know is that the Boojay Family isn't a regular group of exiles. The ancestor who founded it was one of the princes of a feudal kingdom in the galactic center. This was during the height of the Age of Conquest where humanity expanded its borders at a rapid pace and where countless looted resources poured into the heart of human civilization. At the time, a succession battle took place where a dozen princes and princesses battled for the throne that had just been vacated."

Calabast leaned back on her chair while crossing her legs, which happened to highlight her tight leather trousers.

"Ah, succession battles. They are always rife with intrigue, betrayal and tragedy. Countless real life palace dramas have taken place throughout human space, and they will continue to unfold each time a hereditary state with an unclear succession line loses its head. Brute force and seniority are not enough to secure one's ascension to the throne. The typical winners of these shadow wars are candidates who are devious enough to outscheme their rivals and charming enough to win over key stakeholders."

Shederin took another sip of his tea. "If you are already familiar with these plots, then there is no need to detail what has happened. All you need to know is that the ancestor in question was one of the many losers of the succession battle. As is typical, the new sovereign did not kill the man, but exiled him. The ancestor was allowed to bring his personal possessions, his loyal followers and a small fleet before he left."

Nothing sounded out of the ordinary to Ves. There were many defeated losers who had been exiled from the galactic center for one reason or another. Some of them managed to rise up again and become the rulers of powerful states, but many others failed to adapt to the changed circumstances and disappeared into history.

"You said this happened during humanity's golden age, right?" Ves asked. "Does the feudal kingdom still exist?"

"No. In the long years since this event took place, the Terran Confederation integrated the kingdom more deeply. The royal family that descended from the victors of every succession battle transformed into the Chabran Ancient Clan in order to blend into the power structure of the Terrans. Today, the Chabrans still retain much of the old territory of their former kingdom, and they are just as wealthy and powerful as the members of other ancient clans."

That sounded impressive, but the Chabran Ancient Clan was way too far away for Ves to care about them. One of the reasons why he became so eager to enter the Red Ocean was to get away from all of those old relics of the past!

"So what happened to the Boojay Family after they left the galactic center?"

"The Boojays degenerated over the generations, as is typical when exiles are no longer able to pay for the upkeep and replacement of demanding first-class tech." Shederin answered. "Their lack of initiative and overly conservative decision-making has prevented them from suffering any instant losses, but it has also failed to stop their gradual downslide. The Boojay Family finally managed to stabilize as a second-class organization, but they struggled to find opportunities to grow."

"What did they do to earn their keep during these times? The Adelaides became mercenaries, but the Boojays don't share the same impression."

Shederin nodded in agreement. "I agree with you, sir. It has much to do with their origins. The Adelaides used to be soldiers who knew nothing else except to fight and wage war. The Boojays emerged from one of the safest regions of human civilization and its founder was a prince who possessed much more understanding of statecraft than the art of war. The family he led therefore sought to acquire territory, which it did. The Boojays spent many generations administering their own planets under the rule of a state."

"That sounds like a decent outcome all-considered." Ves remarked. "If the Boojays successfully became the rulers of their own province or something, why are they here? Why not stay in their cozy place in the old galaxy?"

"That is because the Boojays have another goal. From the moment the family came into existence, their ancestor had always declared that he or his descendent must do their utmost to return to the kingdom and take it over as its 'rightful' ruler."

Calabast snorted. "Too many losers can't accept the fact that they lost and always aspire for a rematch, not caring that they already had their shot. No one really wants them back. These losers and their descendants mainly want to return in order to satisfy their ego, vanity and perceived honor."

Minister Shederin continued to narrative the Boojay Family's history.

"The Boojays eventually found their footing in the galactic heartland. They came to rule a province in a typical second-rate state. While their new foundation provided them with safety and a steady income, there was little upward mobility. The politics in the region have become too stable and peaceful for them to exploit any opportunities to grow and expand. The Boojay Family became stuck and could never fulfill its ancestor's dream of returning to power in the galactic center."

Ves crossed his arms. "Normally, the descendants who are born after the founding generation will gradually move away from the grudges and ambitions of their elders. After all, the Boojays born in the galactic heartland have no emotional attachment and little idea what they could have been. Their lives in their current homes have become much more relevant to their lives."

"That is often the case, but there are several factors that have caused the descendants of each and every subsequent generation of the Boojay Family to cling to the goals of their ancestor. The main one is that their founding generation lived for hundreds of years after their exile. They were already heavily augmented and received multiple rounds of life-prolonging treatment."

Ves learned about this type of leadership pattern from a lesson that Minister Shederin had taught him in the past.

"That means that the Boojay Family has developed into a typical gerontocracy, right?"

"Exactly, sir. The ancestor and his circle of sycophants never relinquished their power until they were physically unable to continue. Their continuous leadership over much of the Boojay Family's history has led to the development of a conservative, old-fashioned culture that retains many of the unique traits and quirks of the original kingdom where they came from. It was only after they expired after a long time that younger leaders took over, but the successors absorbed so much from their elders that there is not that much of a difference."

"If these Boojays are so conservative and inflexible, then how come they made the radical decision to pack up their bags and move to the new frontier?"

"The leaders of the Boojay Family eventually realized that staying in the same second-rate state will not get them any closer to fulfilling their ancestor's goal." Shederin responded. "The Boojays long struggled to find a better option, but that never materialized until the Big Two opened up the Red Ocean. The Boojays recognized that pioneering in the new frontier is a unique opportunity for them to earn much more money and resources that they need to return to the Chabran Ancient Clan and take it over."

The Boojays hadn't exactly been big, but its long years of stable rule had provided them with a deep enough foundation to fund the formation of a formidable second-class pioneering fleet.

The family gave up everything in the galactic heartland in order to pursue its overarching goal.

Whether the Boojays were right or wrong in trying to fulfill a goal of a long-dead ancestor who shouldn't have burdened his descendants with a futile dream, Ves respected the bravery of the current leaders of the family. He would have made the same decision if he was in their place, if only to shake off the stagnation that had befallen this group.

"So what has the Boojay Family done once since they arrived in this dwarf galaxy?"

"Nothing of notice. As I have explained before, the Boojays are good at administering planets, but they have no experience in exploration and are highly unaccustomed to actual combat. Their first few years were rough. They suffered numerous losses and learned many painful lessons before they finally made the necessary adaptations. Their only saving grace is their veteran ace pilot. Without her immense personal power, the Boojay Family should have joined the long line of pioneering organizations that have met their end in the Red Ocean."

"I see. These Boojays don't sound too clever." Ves remarked. "How the hell did they manage to produce an ace pilot if they hadn't fought in any wars?"

"By sending out their talented mech pilots to conflict zones." Calabast replied. "This is a typical method of exercising troops that are stationed in peaceful territories. Sometimes, the mech pilots in question are asked to disguise their true identities and blend into common mercenary outfits. Other times, the soldiers are assigned to expeditionary armies that are being sent out to reinforce allied states at war."

This was a win-win arrangement. The states embroiled in conflict received additional reinforcements while the powers that sent out its manpower would get to temper its combat troops and allow them to gain a lot of experience.

It was rare for ace pilots to emerge from foreign expeditions, but it still happened in rare occasions. The Boojays were extremely lucky in that regard.

"So what is the Boojay Family like in general?" Ves asked. "I already have a general impression of how the Boojays operate by learning about their history, but how much as the Red Ocean influenced their decision-making?"

"Well, the Boojay Family has been forced to make many adaptations now that it has become a pioneering organization." Shederin responded. "Its leaders have become more proactive and have learned the hard way that acting cautiously will only cause

them to fall behind in the new frontier. Still, change is hard and the Boojays are still out of their depth despite acclimatizing to their new environment for a number of years."

"Are these Boojays good at anything?"

"The Boojays have an old and traditional heritage. They are proud, honorable and take their promises much more seriously than the Adelaides. Their leaders may be slow to come to a consensus, but once they make a decision, they will commit to it with all of their effort. Their mech forces have always been well-funded and well-trained, and they have accrued just enough combat experience during their time in the Red Ocean to form the nucleus of an effective mech army. Their ace pilot is highly regarded and has a positive record against peers."

"Their motives are also easy to understand, just as with the Adelaides." Calabast helpfully added. "That makes them easy for us to predict and manipulate. As long as we don't stand in the way of their ultimate goal, we should easily be able to gain their support in our initiatives."

Ves smiled at that. "I like what I am hearing."