

### Chapter 701 Butchering the Sacred Cows

Without a rudimentary understanding of how neural interfaces worked, a mech designer could still figure out a viable solution, though it would take them longer.

When Ves cut out the complicated jargon and unimportant variables, the basic situation with the mech looked clear. The filters and other measures the neural interface possessed to truncate and purify the data entering the brains of the mech pilot stopped working as normal.

They still worked, but not to a perfect extent. If they stopped working at all, a mech pilot's brains would probably fry within seconds, which was not what the Church of Haatumak wanted to see.

"They want to drag out the torture, make the mech pilots suffer, and witness a good show."

Another clue reinforced this notion. The Evaporating Spear was one of the crappiest third-hand mechs he had ever seen. Even the cheapest, most awful pieces of junk that Walter's Whalers employed in the Glowing Planet campaign were more reliable than the Evaporating Spear at its current state!

"Two days? This mech probably needs at least three weeks of around-the-clock servicing to reach a satisfactory level of performance!"

However, Ves knew that the cultists didn't want to see that. The Redemption Duel wasn't about the machines. To these crazies, it was all about torturing the mech pilots as long as possible and to see which one lasted the longest.

The crappier the mechs, the longer it took to deliver a lethal blow to each other, thereby insuring the Redemption Duel wouldn't end in the first minute.

"It's also cheaper that way. If they employed their proper mechs instead, they risk damaging tens of millions of worth of credits in mechs."

Losing the Evaporating Spear cost the Church of Haatumak nothing, considering they likely salvaged it off a debris field in space somewhere. Losing a more valuable mech like the Gun Whale or the Snapper Dolphin directly weakened their defense line while impacting their budget.

Fanatics or not, they could hardly operate the Temple of Haatumak on faith alone!

The first two problems Ves planned to address required little thought on his part to address. Ves possessed an abundant amount of experience in tweaking the internal architecture of mechs, and patching up the structure of the frame sounded no different to what he was already responsible for as head designer.

"It's the third problem that's really the crux. The neural interface is actively working against the mech pilot, and the only way for me to mitigate the damage is to manipulate the input of data from the rest of the mech."

A mech consisted of a complete system. The cockpit of a mech served as the control center that directed the actions of a mech by transmitting the commands of the mech pilot sitting within.

Mech. Cockpit. Mech pilot.

Ordinarily, a mech designer grouped up the former two or all three of them in a single group, essentially regarding them as one entity. A completely normal neural interface allowed the mech designer to blur the distinction between the mech and mech pilot and therefore consider their combination as the effective controlling force of the machine.

"Yet now the neural interface has stopped working as intended."

A complication occurred in the connection between the cockpit and the mech pilot. The chain had been broken and the cycle of input and output became rugged and uneven.

The input from a mech to its mech pilot became bloated with junk data, while the output from the mech pilot to its mech became shriveled due to the unimaginable pain he went through.

Both of these effects decreased the level of control of the mech to a point where the mech pilot effectively exhibited an F-grade neural aptitude.

This was catastrophic.

"I've got to bump up the effective neural aptitude to at least E or E+. Settling for E- is too insufficient. Acolyte Gien is no Leviticus, and a spaceborn mech requires substantially more exertion to pilot than a landbound mech."

If Ves centered his perspective around the mech pilot, then he had two ways of addressing the problem. He could either minimize the input of data or amplify the output of data transmitted out of the mech pilot's brains.

Despite the gruesome nature of this torture, Ves couldn't help but become intrigued at this unique problem. It was a novel situation that Ves had never encountered before in his career as a mech designer.

Ves enjoyed these challenges. They presented an interesting set of demands that Ves needed to pull all the stops to fulfill. Any passionate mech designer would feel the same as him. Fail or succeed, they always came away with another distinctive experience that enriched their mech design foundation.

However, this assignment came with one other major snag. The ethical dilemma constantly hung over his head like a Sword of Damocles ready to slice his head from his neck.

The issue stemmed from the fact that if Ves played along with the twisted game the Soulless Priest pushed him into, he'd be engaging in a gross violation of the mech designer's creed.

A creed was more than a simple statement of intent. It governed the spirit that guided his design work.

The wording differed from region to region, from school to school, from teacher to teacher, from generation to generation.

However, the essence of the creed broadly followed the same core thread.

"Mech designers are servants to the mech pilots they serve."

This simple, broad sentence laid down the ideal relationship between a mech designer and a mech pilot. A mech designer must not place their interests above the interests of the mech pilot, and should never produce a mech that harmed the mech pilot.

It was pretty safe to say that the Evaporating Spear with its messed up neural interface directly took a dump on the mech designer's creed.

If Ves was a scummy pirate designer who possessed no scruples for any rules or taboos, then he wouldn't let this little ethical violation stop him from advancing his goals.

Yet he was not. Ves may have played fast and loose with some of the rules, but when it came to mech design he had almost always embodied the spirit of a proper mech designer.

He may not look like it at times, but he agreed with and identified with the mech designer's creed.

It fulfilled the same role as the old Hippocratic Oath that had been much-maligned during the Age of Conquest and only recently regained its standing in the Age of Mechs.

Doctors and exobiologists used to treat their patients as test subjects for their latest genetic concoctions. The old rule that they should do no harm to those under their care was conveniently laid aside, to disastrous result as their

unbridled experimentation led to horrors that humanity had only been able to suppress at ruinous cost.

No one wanted to reopen Pandora's Box in this age.

Humanity had learned the hard way that good ethics played a vital role in steering their civilization. From the start of any mech design class in a university or institution, the teachers stress the importance that they were brought up to become a mech pilot's most essential aid.

"The mechs we fashion out of our imagination brings mech pilots one step closer to victory."

Would Ves still be doing the mech pilot a service by developing a literal torture machine for him? No matter what mental gymnastics he came up with, Ves couldn't avoid the fact that his product was expressly designed to harm and torment its own mech pilot.

Even if Ves was brought up by the orthodox principles of the MTA, he could still accept this bad situation by convincing himself that enabling Acolyte Gien to win would benefit the poor sod more than any other alternative. The traitor to the Church had already been condemned to death. The Redemption Duel offered a minute opportunity to gain a second life, so technically Ves shouldn't make a big deal out of this situation.

The problem here was that the Evaporating Spear pretty much ran counter to his own design philosophy.

"And that makes my approach to this mech exceedingly important."

No matter what road he decided to take, once he stepped forward he could never go back. His decision at this point would impact his design philosophy for the rest of his mech design career.

His design philosophy centered around bringing life to mechs and ascribing a higher intrinsic value to their existence.

However, Ves did not forget about the human component either. A mech gained its fullest expression when they were paired up with a compatible mech pilot that shared the same traits and values.

Simply said, a good mech was one that mech pilots felt comfortable about. Ves had always aimed to maximize the compatibility and fit between the mech and mech pilot, if only because it was an easy method to increase the performance of his products without investing in better licenses or more expensive materials.

Becoming involved with the design of the Evaporating Spear threatened to chip away at the foundation that Ves had painstakingly built up for several years.

Ves was particularly accustomed to pushing problems that he couldn't solve to the back of his mind and forget about them, but he wouldn't be able to do so at this instance.

He couldn't avoid the ethical implications of his decision. He needed to tackle it head-on. No matter what he decided, incurring damage was inevitable.

..Or was it?

If Ves approached this situation with the mindset of an orthodox mech designer, he might have tortured himself about the consequences of what he might incur. And while he did so, did this mindset really apply to him as closely as he initially thought?

"Can I even call myself an orthodox mech designer?"

Several points about his career track put this assertion to doubt. Ever since he received the System, his development had taken an entirely different

progression. Not only had it accelerated, it also broke numerous rules, many of them harmless, but one of them was extremely egregious.

He recalled the time he moved all the way to a lifeless star system in the middle of the Bright Republic and holed himself up in an asteroid to work on a gamma laser rifle. Back then, his nascent design philosophy was a lot more immature, and thereby had been flexible enough to remain intact despite his massive violation of one of the fundamental taboos of the MTA and CFA.

Even though the System instigated him into doing so, Ves fully accepted responsibility over his crime!

"I've already run roughshod over the rules governing mech designers!"

Even though he only crossed the line so severely for a single instant, that decision tainted his entire outlook on mech design.

He realized the effect even now. A normal mech designer should have been horrified and apprehensive at the thought of breaking one of the cardinal rules that the MTA held high! Yet while Ves agonized over the decision, he didn't exactly feel any fear at the thought of crossing the line!

The absence of fear perplexed him. Why didn't he feel scared at the thought of treating the MTA and its sacred cows with contempt?

Now, he realized that the incident with working with gamma ray technology affected him far more than he had ever thought. His design philosophy already followed a skewed path from the start, but choosing to work with forbidden tech derailed his path completely from the orthodox direction!

In essence, Ves had more in common with the pirate designers of the frontier than the orthodox mech designers from civilized space!

The principles he thought he respected so dearly turned out to be empty platitudes that Ves only adhered to when it suited him. The moment a rule became a hindrance to his interests, he wasn't afraid at all to push it aside!

"I am unbound from the MTA!"

This statement encompassed the state in which he found himself in. While he still valued certain principles, they didn't necessarily have to match the principles of the MTA! What was best for Ves may not be best for the MTA and vica versa. Becoming unbound from this powerful organization meant that Ves essentially freed himself from becoming one of their slaves!

He laughed, causing Acolyte Villis to stir from her robes. The old lady had been watching Ves quietly while he wasted his time in his own mind. To her, Ves should be making use of every spare second to improve the Evaporating Spear.

Yet none of that was as important as the realization that Ves no longer needed to concern himself with shackles that no longer existed.

No one cared about the rules in the frontier! Why should Ves be any different?

Perhaps he spent too much time immersing himself in frontier culture, or perhaps the mental contamination from the Skull Architect and the research papers had influenced him too much. Yet now that he thought about it, why should he hold any reverence to the sacred cows when Ves was in the mood for steak?

### **Chapter 702 Pain Machine**

Just because Ves could treat the rules as air, didn't mean he should degenerate into a lawless hoodlum of a mech designer. Rules were useful to keep him on the right track. Even he had to admit that the MTA largely got things right.



The mech industry would have looked a lot more ugly if the regulating influence of the MTA hadn't come and tamed the worst impulses of mech designers and mech pilots.

However, the realization that Ves had just made pointed out that he'd benefit more if he acted like a hypocrite. It benefited him if his competitors needed to adhere to the rules and principles espoused by the MTA while he retained the freedom to pick and choose when they suited him or not. As long as he didn't get caught, he could do anything he wanted!

"And that's the other pitfall I have to be careful of if I violate the rules."

Ves believed that the Skull Architect had come to a similar realization a long time ago. At some point, Reno Jimenez decided he was better off ignoring the rules that hindered his research.

The Senior's only mistake was to get caught while doing so.

"I have to learn from his example. If I'm doing something shady, I better not go overboard and become so unhinged that I'm unable to assess the risks of my actions."

Ves forcefully calmed himself down. He needed to get back to business. Now that he found out he could overcome his ethical objections to this job by ignoring some of his principles entirely, he had to make use of this opportunity.

He called up the design schematics of the Evaporating Spear and went to work. He started to draft some easy corrections that didn't take too much time or resources to apply. Ves found many inefficiencies, but it galled him a bit that he needed to leave most of them alone due to lack of time to address them in a timely manner.

It was as if an entire city erupted in fire, but Ves only had the time to put out the flames in a single district before the rest burned to a crisp.

Along the way, he also started to figure out ways to address the biggest issue plaguing the mech. This required a lot more thought and ingenuity on his part. With the neural interface purposely configured to kill its own mech pilot in a tortuous fashion, Ves needed to work around this handicap and lessen its impact on Acolyte Gien.

"It's all about the input and output of data to and from the mech pilot."

The easiest way to address this issue was to amplify the strained and garbled data transmitted by the mech pilot's overstressed brains. Due to the torture he would likely be going through, interpreting the data instructions from the mech pilot would be severely limited in detail and sophistication.

If someone dumped Ves into a vat filled with acidic solutions, Ves would probably be suffering from too much pain to design a mech at the same time. Perhaps he could manage to draw a few lines that composed a sketch of a design, but the end product wouldn't be too great.

The same applied to Acolyte Gien. With so few instructions transmitted from his brains, how could his spaceborn lancer mech act in a lifelike fashion?

Many frontline mech designs suffered from the same problems. Despite simplifying the design of the mech to only the most essential parts, their designers still grappled with the issue that many borderline cases with extremely deficient genetic aptitudes wouldn't be able to pilot their frontline mechs to a reasonable standard.

So the designers cheated in a way. They compensated for the lack of skill and expression by their crappy mech pilots through pre-programmed actions and AI-assisted movements!

For example, the act of walking a mech from point A to point B entailed billions of individual data transmissions. A neural interface that immersed a

mech pilot deeply with their mech would directly lean on the mech pilot's brains to control the movements to a precise degree.

However, many frontline mechs came with a form of automation or cruise control, for a lack of a better word. Instead of relying on an untalented mech pilot to strain their minds into maintaining the movement of their mechs, they could instead send out a single command to a control AI which directed various subroutines or algorithms to move the mech forward in their stead.

The difference between a single command and a billion individual transmissions was huge!

Yet relying too much on automation came with very big caveats. A mech that offloaded more and more control to AIs began to resemble a bot rather than a mech!

"A mech that is governed more by its AIs rather than its mech pilot is as effective in battle as a bot!"

Implementing such routines shouldn't be very challenging to Ves. He had access to a library of pirates AIs and algorithms from the local database of the Church of Haatumak. Many of them seemed tailor-made for the situation at hand. This indicated to Ves that this was far from the only time they held a Redemption Duel with these limitations.

However, Ves disdained this particular solution. Watching two mechs that were essentially controlled by bots did not stoke anyone's blood. This put the considerable abilities of Acolyte Gien out of play, turning his mech into his prison both physically and mentally.

It would also disappoint the expectations of the Church. Ves figured the battle needed to be as exciting as a mech arena spectacle between two evenly-matched opponents.

Before he started though, he still needed to decide on an important matter. Should he leverage his Spirituality into reshaping the Evaporating Spear's X-Factor?

Currently, Ves sensed it was a complete mess, which wasn't unusual to mechs that passed through multiple incompetent hands.

The issue he mulled over was whether he could risk using his specialty in the midst of a hidden hand of the Five Scrolls Compact!

Ves stared at Acolyte Villis who had never once stopped staring at Ves while he sat behind the terminal.

Too dangerous!

With this strange old lady monitoring his every move, Ves feared the possibility that they might pick up a clue. The strange encounter with TekTak showed that the Church and its mother organization were one of the few entities that may be able to detect something funny.

As much as it pained Ves to keep an essential tool of his locked in his proverbial tool chest, he really did not wish to fall into the hands of these crazy cultists!

He shook his head. Instead of focusing on an advantage he couldn't put into play, he should instead focus on the issues he'd be able to form a response.

"Acolyte Villis."

"Yes, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Who are my opponents? Is their mech pilot as skilled as Acolyte Gien? Is the mech designer who's assigned to work on the opposition's mech from the frontier or from civilized space?"

The acolyte shook her head behind her darkened hood. "Where's the fun in this contest if you are able to anticipate your opponent? You will have to find

out the answer to these questions on your own on the day of the Redemption Duel.

Ves figured Acolyte Villis would answer him with a non-answer. The lack of intelligence on the opposition's mech, mech pilot and mech designer left a huge question mark in his mind. Without a solid idea of the opposition the Evaporating Spear would face, Ves needed to utilize his own judgement and make his mech as adaptable as possible.

"I don't know if the Evaporating Spear will face a melee mech or a ranged mech." He said to himself. "It could be a light skirmisher, which is nimble and easy to miss for a slower lancer mech. It could be a cannoneer as well, something that hits hard and can disable the Evaporating Spear long before it can close the distance."

As Ves started to tweak the design further, he emphasized its flexibility rather than extending its performance parameters towards a specific direction.

These competing priorities affected mobility most of all! Ves tugged between strengthening the design's agility to increasing its acceleration. The former increased the Evaporating Spear's effectiveness against melee mechs while the latter helped the mech improve its odds against ranged mechs.

It didn't help that increasing one aspect largely came at the cost of the other aspect. Ves had to finagle a lot of creative solutions in order to minimize the negative impact of his adjustments.

Still, the sheer inefficiencies in the original design and its subsequent amateurish repairs gave Ves a lot of leeway in optimizing its internal architecture. By the end of his first design phase, the Evaporating Spear's mobility increased by at least twenty-five percent, which was a massive jump for so little work!

In the meantime, he also worked on tweaking the input of data to the cockpit. While it was far easier to amplify the output of data by outsourcing control over the mech to an AI or some algorithms, they were too rigid and limited in his eyes.

Ves did not want to design a bot!

So instead, he chose to walk the difficult path by trying to do something about all of the excess junk data that was being transmitted to the mech pilot.

First, he identified where the junk data came from. It didn't show up from nothing, after all.

"I see. A mech is a complicated machine with countless moving parts." He nodded in understanding. "Most of the time, their input isn't very relevant to the mech pilot, so they get filtered out by submodules built into the cockpit. These submodules and subroutines decide which packets of data gets to be passed on to the mech pilot and which packets of data needs to be thrown out."

Ves wanted to figure out a way to decrease the transmission of junk data even before it arrived at the cockpit.

It sounded easy to do for a layman. If some component, say a temperature meter installed in the arm to watch for overheating, sent a status update to the cockpit every millisecond, he could simply cut the frequency in half. So instead of reporting the temperature of that arm section by every second, it would do so every two seconds.

That wasn't the end. What if instead of reporting in every two seconds, Ves decreased the interval even further? Even if he decreased the frequency to a rate of once per minute, the performance of the mech would hardly be affected!

If Ves could apply this solution to something as small and inconsequential to a temperature meter, he could apply the same solution to millions of other tiny components, each of which constantly bombarded the cockpit with data sent at an interval measured in microseconds or nanoseconds in some cases!

A machine didn't care about how many times it received a data packet from the same source. One component or a million components, as long as the cockpit came with enough processing power, it could easily handle a thousand times the raw input of a mech!

But a human mind was different!

"A baseline human's brains can't match the sheer processing power of an artificial chip. Our evolution hasn't been able to keep up with the advancement in processing power!"

A well-tuned cockpit and neural interface treated incoming data in an intelligent fashion. It offloaded the inconsequential matters to the processors and transferred pertinent data to the mech pilot to their organic minds.

Right now, the dysfunction of this feature forced Ves to make his own decisions on what kind of data a mech pilot needed to know.

Suffice to say, Ves had to do a lot of cutting in order to lighten the mech pilot's burden.

The trouble was that while some components only played a marginal role, many others played a more vital one. For example, a temperature regulator that only transmitted its status once every minute might eventually result in catastrophe if the arm overheated without the mech pilot becoming aware of the danger.

With the sheer amount of interdependence between different components and subcomponents, Ves possessed a lot less leeway in this area than it

appeared. If he went too far with the cutting, two possible outcomes might result.

The first result was that the components or even the entire mech stopped working entirely. This was because Ves interrupted a critical data loop between interconnected components.

The second result was that the mech became jerky. The increase in reporting interval caused the mech's feedback loop to lag. Increased delays between input and output effectively had the result of delaying a mech pilot's actions by several hundred milliseconds.

This was catastrophic, and could mean the difference between victory and defeat!

Therefore, Ves needed to be restrained in this fashion. In the end, he only managed to cut the total input of raw data by around sixty percent.

### **Chapter 703 Acolyte Gien**

Decreasing the transmission of raw data to the cockpit by sixty percent sounded impressive.

However, it did not measurably lessen the pain experienced by Acolyte Gien. Ves estimated that he needed to cut the data stream by at least ninety-eight percent for it to stop causing permanent harm to the mech pilot!

"Solving the problem completely isn't doable. Not only will the mech be almost uncontrollable to Acolyte Gien, it also spits in the face of the Church's intentions."

What Ves had effectively done was to make the torture device a little less lethal. The torture victim practically felt just as much pain, but he'd be able to endure the torture at least twice as long, prolonging his suffering!

Ves snorted at the morbid notion that popped up in his mind. "If I can't make it as a mech designer, I can always transition into designing torture machines."



Working on modifying the design of the Evaporating Spear had exposed the full horror of what a faulty neural interface could unleash! Ves always knew that mech pilots risked sustaining permanent brain damage in theory, but to contribute on a mech where this became a feature instead of a fault was something else!

To state that his design philosophy remained pure and unchanged was a lie. The pressure it endured had left some marks. In the future, his design philosophy would bend more easily under pressure. In exchange, it lost some of the backbone that made it pure.

Time would tell whether this change benefited him more than it cost, but Ves willingly embraced this shift.

Ves already witnessed the strengths and drawbacks of a rigid design philosophy. Single-minded in focus, as long as the mech designer kept following the proscribed paths, they advanced relatively quickly and improved quite fast.

However, once they fell into a completely different circumstance, they encountered many difficulties in trying to adjust their design philosophy to the changes they experienced.

The Skull Architect with his extremely narrow-minded research focus suffered from this fault.

Ves did not lack for confidence in his ability to advance his own path in mech design. He already did so since the start with his pioneering work on the X-Factor. With his various advantages, he did not require an additional boost in this department.

What he valued instead was adaptability! With a potential career that spanned for several hundred years at the very least, human society would doubtlessly

experience many changes. Ves wanted to insure he retained the flexibility to keep up with the times.

If his design philosophy was flexible enough to bend to any storm, then Ves would be able to prosper regardless if he based himself in the Bright Republic, the Friday Coalition, the frontier or even the galactic heartland or the galactic center!

His paranoia urged him to be constantly prepared for danger no matter where he based himself. He needed to be ready to abandon all that he worked towards and flee to safer regions.

Ves came to the realization that one of the major reasons why mech designers in the galactic rim rarely chose to relocate closer to the center of the galaxy. Their design philosophy simply couldn't adapt to the changed environment. A different mech industry, a different mech market, mech designers were forced to discard too many habits and customs they took for granted.

Still, despite the fact that these highly focused mech designers likely fared poorly should they relocate to a different region of the galaxy, they excelled at the areas they were good at. Ves guessed that the most successful mech designers were those who put their entire heart and soul into their primary pursuits.

"The Star Designers form the best example of what an obsession can amount to when pursued to the extreme."

Of the hundred Star Designers in existence to this day and age, the majority spent the vast majority of their early careers in doggedly becoming the best in a specific field!

However, examples to the contrary existed as well. The Polymath served as the quintessential example of how a broad focus or a complete lack of focus did not stop a mech designer from reaching the pinnacle in mech design!

Though it made his future advancement a little more difficult, he felt liberated for making this choice. Unbound by rules, decoupled from the MTA and able to bend in any situation, his changing design philosophy experienced a fundamental paradigm shift.

If he had to summarize the most important change, then his new design philosophy cared less about the process and more about the end result.

He wouldn't care too much if he needed to break a few eggs to make an omelet.

"I suppose that also answers the question of whether I should care about the mech pilots I'm serving."

His new shift enabled him to remain callous and unfeeling even if he contributed to harming the mech pilots who used his mechs. Though this didn't forbid him from selectively caring for some of his favored clients and customers, his default state could be described as indifferent.

In other words, he didn't care!

Did this mean he let go of the mech designer's creed? Not entirely. He still recognized its exemplary value and an ideal to measure up to. Ves simply regarded it as a guideline instead of a hard rule to follow.

The loss of innocence may be a regretful matter to some, but Ves reaped the benefits of it as the strain of working on the Evaporating Spear faded into the background.

His design philosophy exhibited the flexibility of a tree in the middle of a storm. As long as the wind didn't blow too hard or too often, Ves would be able to

retain much of his old values even as he did the opposite of what he was supposed to! He was basically having his cake and eating it too!

"Brilliant!" He uttered as the design came closer to exhibiting a satisfactory level of performance. Instead of being wracked with guilt, he reveled in the challenge and enjoyment of working on such an unusual project. "I should have figured this out sooner!"

Guided by a design philosophy that bent but never snapped, Ves finalized the entire design, rebirthing it from its humble and neglected origins and shaping it to become a mech fit for dueling!

As Ves studied the finished redesign, he frowned a bit when he picked up a trace of spirituality from its design.

"I failed." He said, causing Acolyte Villis to jerk confusedly at him. "I'm too strong for my own good."

The mech designers who worked on the Evaporating Spear before Ves got his hands on it were barely above amateur level. Both their technical ability and their design philosophies simply couldn't hold a candle to Ves.

Even unconsciously and unfocused, his passive Spirituality exerted so much strength that it had practically overridden much of the design's muddy vision with one of his own!

Ves carefully tasted the changes in the spiritual nature of the design. Its X-Factor gained definition, and while it may not be too strong, it was no longer a muddy swamp of noise as before.

His subconscious desires and intentions seemed to have imprinted the vague vision he constructed in his mind on the design.

The mech turned from a mech without a defined vision to one that carried the notion of sacrifice. The Evaporating Spear veered away from a mech that tormented its pilot for petty reasons.

Instead, the lancer mech became a furnace that harnessed its mech pilot's pain, stimulating them both to perform at their greatest potential!

"It's going to be hard to live up to that ideal."

Just because he created a lofty vision didn't mean his end product matched his intentions. Lack of time, lack of tools, lack of materials and lack of other resources hampered him from fulfilling his vision to the end.

He just had to settle for halfway or less. Though it rankled him a bit to surrender to practicality, virtually every mech designer suffered from the exact same problem, so learning how to deal with disappointment was part of their profession.

"Now that I'm ready to implement my design, there is one issue I need to address."

Ves stretched his back as best he could in his combat armor and rose up from the terminal. He looked around the assembly bay and spotted the Evaporating Spear's fated mech pilot slouching like a homeless bum off the streets. The sorry figure hadn't moved from the stack of crates that served as his makeshift seat.

"Tch." He almost spat. "This won't do."

The strength of the mech depended heavily on the strength of the mech pilot. If the mech pilot already gave up, the mech itself wouldn't be able to leverage its strength at all! Most of the work that Ves was about to perform on the Evaporating Spear would be wasted if Acolyte Gien continued to feel sorry for himself.

Ves marched over to the cultist pilot and loomed over the depressed-looking figure.

"Acolyte. Look up at me."

"Pff." Gien puffed through his lips. The man continued to stare at the deck.

"..What is it, outsider?"

"Are you ready to fight?"

"What's the point? I'll be dead either way."

"According to your fellow acolyte, you still have an opportunity to make it out alive." Ves replied while pointing his thumb at Acolyte Villis, who silently kept pace with Ves. "I've just finished planning for the redesign for your dueling mech. Instead of brooding here like a loser, why don't you spend your time more productively? I can load the latest design into a simulator pod for you to become accustomed to its performance parameters. Considering the nature of the Redemption Duel, you don't want to go into the battle without knowing what your mech is capable of!"

"I'm dead either way!" Acolyte Gien yelled as he stood up and yelled right in front of Ves. "This duel is pointless! My life was forfeit as soon as the Priests caught me passing information to a fellow pirate!"

"What's done is done. Are you going to feel sorry for yourself all the way up to the Redemption Duel? Get your butt back into gear and fight, damnit! It's not the end for you!"

"You have no idea what's in store for me." Gien shook his head and crossed his arms. "Even if I win, the Priests will convert me into a Living Altar. An outsider like you will never be able to fathom the full extent of this ritual! They say that I will be reborn, but that is a lie! All that is me is gone, and in its place is a different me that wears my face but carries the soul of Haatumak!"

Acolyte Villis abruptly lunged forward. For an old crone, she moved remarkably nimbly, as if a twenty-year old woman in her prime hid beneath a bag of old and saggy skin! A gloved palm emerged from her robes and slapped the mech pilot in the cheek.

"Do not repeat your error, Gien!" She hissed in an awful serpentine tone. "The ways of Haatumak are not to be divulged to our guests!"

The mech pilot recoiled in fear at the old crone. Evidently, the woman inspired fear despite her low rank. "F-F-Forgive me, Villis!"

Ves witnessed the brief exchange. Gien hardly flinched when Ves confronted the traitor, yet immediately turned into a scaredy-cat after a single rebuke from Villis. Perhaps he could make use of this dynamic.

"Acolyte Villis, can I ask you a favor?"

The old crone turned her hooded head at Ves. "We are not in the business of providing favors without cost, Mr. Larkinson."

"I think this will benefit the both of us."

"Speak, then."

"Well, considering that you appear to have the power to keep this sad excuse of a mech pilot on his toes, can you motivate him to fight? He needs a good kick in the butt if he's to be prepared for his Redemption Duel."

Villis briefly paused, as if she hesitated over the suggestion. Eventually, she agreed. "Though it is outside the scope of my orders, this is Haatumak's will. Rest assured that Acolyte Villis will be fully prepared to fight when it is time."

"No!" Gien screamed and fell down in front of Ves. He crawled towards Ves until his arms clutched the legs. "Don't leave me alone with Acolyte Villis! Anything but that! She's one of the most fearsome acolytes aboard the temple!"

Ves rudely kicked away the arms enveloping his armored legs. "I don't care. Just do your duty and practice with the new design! I'm counting on you to win!"

So long as Acolyte Gien fought as hard as he could, Ves was reassured he'd be able to obtain his promised rewards. As for what happened next to the poor brain-damaged mech pilot, it was none of his business.

#### **Chapter 704 Frontier Fairness**

Two days later, Ves sat at an observation chamber at the upper decks of the Temple. It was built out of one of the eye sockets of the leviathan remnant's skeleton, and so could easily accommodate a small crowd of guests.

Ves tiredly wiped his face. He worked for two days straight, neither sleeping nor ever lowering his guard against the potential antics the cultists might be up to. Sometimes, Ves heard awful noises and screams from the other side of the mech workshop. Other times, the chamber descended into a place of worship as every mech technician spontaneously put down their tools and kneeled down to pray to Haatumak.

Suffice to say, the sooner he got off the Temple, the easier he could breathe. The constant staring and the all-encompassing strangeness grated on his nerves, eating away his sanity every second he spent aboard this massive vessel.

The Temple of Haatumak represented one of the ugliest facets of the frontier. She was one of many starships in the Faris Star Region that played host to exiles too extreme to conform to the rules and customs of civilized space.

In the lawless environment of the untamed stars, the worshippers that ran the ship exhibited a complete lack of restraint. With no one to stop them, they did whatever they thought that Haatumak approved.



This cruel and sadistic Redemption Duel counted as one of them, and a milder one at that. The MTA would have a heart attack if they witnessed it, but Ves fortunately diverged his values from theirs long ago.

The observation chamber became host to a number of middle-ranked Living Altars and their Acolyte followers.

From what Ves picked up during his time aboard the Temple, the Living Altars each differed substantially in their beliefs and their teaching. While they all venerated Haatumak above anything else, they expressed them in different ways.

The various Acolytes of the Church either chose a Living Altar to follow or were assigned to them by a Priest. Each Acolyte had the potential to become a Priest or Living Altar themselves, which represented an opportunity to escape their humble status at the bottom of the totem pole and become a figure of stature within the Church.

However, attrition among the Acolytes constantly took a toll on their numbers. Dangers roamed aplenty aboard the Temple, and those who met an unfortunate end from a ritual gone wrong happened quite a lot.

Still, some of this was pure speculation on his part. He hadn't been able to decipher why people felt drawn to the Church in the first place, and how the cultists selected their new entrants.

"Mr. Larkinson!"

Ves turned his head and saw to his surprise that Mayra had arrived. Her Acolyte minder guided the Swordmaiden mech designer towards the empty seat next to his own. Clad in savage, tribal-like armor, she looked as valiant as any other Swordmaiden.

She was everything Ketis tried to be. Sitting so close to her made him feel as if he sat next to a dormant exobeast. Yet Ves was well aware that Mayra's fighting prowess paled in comparison to her ability in mech design.

Perhaps the mech designers back in civilized space might scoff as a savage calling herself a Journeyman, but Ves considered her the real deal.

"Mayra! Why are you here?"

The middle-aged woman grinned at him. "My mech is about to take part in a duel. What about you?"

"It's the same for me! Wait a second.. How many duels are taking place today?"

"Only one Redemption Duel is on the agenda for today." Acolyte Villis helpfully informed him, causing Ves to look distressed.

"What?!" He sat up straight in his chair. "I've been matching my design against yours!? That doesn't make any sense! I'm still an Apprentice Mech Designer while you're a Journeyman Mech Designer!"

Acolyte Villis released a sadistic cackle. "Did you think this competition was fair? Hah! Naive! The frontier is never fair to its people, and neither is Haatumak! We must all deal with the hand we are dealt!"

Mayra placed her gauntleted hand on his own that rested on the seatrest.

"Calm yourself, Mr. Larkinson. What's done is done. The worshippers of Haatumak delight in getting a rise out of their guests. It's one of the few sources of entertainment they are allowed to enjoy."

She was right. An outburst changed nothing, so Ves pushed down his alarm. Still, his bones cried out against the unfairness of matching up an Apprentice against a Journeyman!

No matter how highly he thought of his ability, he never considered himself to be superior to a genuine Journeyman. Their degree of utilization and their condensed design philosophies gave them a solid edge of Ves whose true strength still remained rather brittle and ephemeral.

In the mech industry, Apprentices were children and Journeymen were adults. The latter always won against the former in a direct battle.

Ves had no choice but to prepare himself for defeat this time.

As they waited for the spectators to catch up to the event, the two guests began to talk about Ketis.

"How is my protege fairing so far in your care?" Mayra asked.

Ves was struck as her bearing as a Swordmaiden and a mech designer. It contained the best parts of both, having discarded the uncontrolled wildness that was inherent in a Swordmaiden and the physical insecurity of a mech designer. Best of all, Mayra managed to do so without revealing a hint of instability.

He wondered what kind of excess Mayra hid beneath her composure. From what he knew about mech designers, Mayra's veneer of civility looked convincing, but he bet she had her own skeletons in the closet. No successful mech designer survived the frontier without some blemishes on their hands.

"Ketis is doing well enough under my instruction, I suppose. As she lacks the institutional upbringing that a mech designer internalizes from a university or institution, I've been focused on drilling her on that aspect. I've simultaneously pushed her to be more hands-on with her work. I understand she hasn't spent much time in the mech workshops."

Mayra raised her eyebrow at him. "You put her in a mech workshop? Do you know how she must hate the thought of working in close proximity to the mech technicians?"

"Look, I've heard that you treat your mech technicians like slaves, but that doesn't excuse washing your hands from the responsibilities outside the design phase. I've been brought up by the idea that a good mech designer is one that masters all the phases in the life cycle of a mech. It's not enough to become proficient at the design phase. Knowing how to fabricate and service them is a vital component of our duties, especially if we are employed in the service of an outfit."

"You're right, of course." She conceded. "Yet Ketis is different than us. Her drive isn't there. I didn't bring her down to the mech workshops because the work there is largely menial. Flooding her with too much menial work will only snuff out the embers that drive her forward."

Ves disagreed. The Swordmaidens had themselves to blame for treating their mech technicians like garbage, thereby poisoning Ketis' respect for their class. Solving this issue and showing her the value of a well-trained team of mech technicians was one of his biggest challenges.

"I'm not sure how long she's able to stay under my wing. She needs more than a few months to round out her shortcomings as a mech designer, at least in the classical sense."

"You don't need to go that far." Mayra smiled at Ves. "As long as she discovers her drive, the rest can be made up later. Right now, experiencing a radically different working environment will hopefully force her to question what she really wants out of her life."

The pirate designer had been part of the Swordmaidens since they were small and weak. Mayra went through many hardships when she fought and struggled alongside Commander Lydia. Ketis missed out on this difficult period, and therefore lacked perspective.

Her time under Ves aboard the Shield of Hispania already benefited her. Ves enjoyed the same fruits as his various adventures and his current tour of duty forced him to endure radically different mech design conditions.

At some point, the Soulless Priest who presided over the duel no longer delayed the matter. A whole ceremony must be taking place in the central hall or some other compartment, but guests like Ves and Mayra were prohibited from witnessing it. Thus, they'd been pushed to an observation chamber along with some other unimportant cultists.

Two mechs emerged from different hangar bays. At this distance, Ves had difficulty seeing them with the naked eye. Fortunately, high-fidelity projectors sprang to life. Two of them transmitted closeups for each dueling mech while a third one attempted to frame them both to provide an overview of the battle.

Surprisingly, the mechs hadn't activated yet. Instead, they were being towed out into open space by two other mechs that possessed robust flight systems. While it still took some time to tow out the competition mechs to a safe distance from the Temple of Haatumak and her escorts, ten minutes later the Soulless Priest must have been satisfied as he ordered the tow mechs to cut their connections and fly out of the way.

A silence ensued in the observation chamber as all the cultists halted their conversation. No one was interested in small talk while the duel was about to commence.

Two more projections sprang to life. They depicted the interior of the cockpits of the two mechs. One of them depicted Acolyte Gien, while the other depicted a female mech pilot.

"Who's the woman?" He asked.

"Acolyte Evie Simmons." Mayra answered. With the duel ready to start at any moment, she saw no point in withholding her accomplishments. "She's a

striker mech pilot, actually, but the Redemption Rose the worshippers assigned to her is a medium space knight! Prepping the mech to work with someone who specializes in a different type of mechs has been challenging."

Hearing that caused Ves to become a little upset over the uneven matchup. Failing to provide a preferred mech type increased the odds for his side, but only a little.

That was because striker mechs had much in common with knight mechs. Both were comparatively hefty mech types that depended on brute force and ponderous moves to fight.

Knight mechs leaned more towards defense by limiting themselves to a sword and shield as their primary armament.

Striker mechs leaned towards offense with their short-ranged wide-area weaponry such as shotguns and flamethrowers.

In addition, every mech pilot's basic training forced them to become proficient with both knight mechs and rifleman mechs before they branched out to other mech types.

To someone like Acolyte Evie, piloting a knight mech was like picking up an old hobby. If she spent the last weeks practicing with knight mechs in the simulators, then she wouldn't be worse off.

Ves stared hard at the Redemption Rose's design. As someone who dabbled extensively in landbound knight mechs, he identified a lot of distinctive features about the Redemption Rose.

"Looks like you've modified the Redemption Rose from a defensive knight into an offensive knight!"

In his eyes, the Redemption Rose appeared as if it used to be overweight, but underwent surgery that removed a lot of excess fat. The sudden transition always left some marks behind, particularly when Mayra had been in a rush.

Besides slimming down the space knight, the Redemption Rose design sported many shared elements of the Misty Slasher. The space knight inherited both the increased arm strength and the placement of miniboosters from Mayra's exclusive swordsman mech design!

To call the Redemption Rose might not be accurate. Through Mayra's extensive intervention, the formerly defense-oriented space knight turned into one of the strangest hybrids between an offensive space knight and a swordsman mech that Ves had ever seen!

It was basically a swordsman mech with a shield!

#### **Chapter 705 Redemption Duel**

The Redemption Rose faced off against the Evaporating Spear. Both dueling mechs awaited activation, yet the duel didn't center around the mechs. Instead, they formed the backdrop to the impending struggles of Acolyte Evie and Acolyte Gien, both of whom would participate in one of the darkest mech duels that Ves had ever witnessed.

"Who do you think will win?" Mayra asked.

"I'm sure you have a better idea than I do." Ves responded with a grim expression. He did not rate his chances highly. "While I've done my best in fixing up the Evaporating Spear, I'm sure your mech is in a much better state."

"Don't count out your mech so soon, Mr. Larkinson. Neither you nor I received enough time to perform anything but the bare necessities. If we had a week's time or more, our disparity will begin to show, but two days is not enough to widen the gap that much."

She had a point. They both fixed up the basic deficiencies of the mech before they added their own unique touches to their mechs, which shouldn't have amounted to much.

Still, Ves recognized that Mayra had the advantage here, as decades of experience as well as a greater utilization of her skills enabled her to work faster than any immature Apprentice. Even Ves had to admit defeat in front of her advantage in accumulation. The fact that the Redemption Rose sported visibly strengthened arms and minibooters showed that she got a lot more work done in the same amount of time.

"The mechs are activating!"

The activation process from a cold start took as long as a minute for low-quality mechs. As the projections of the cockpits showed consoles and various displays coming to life, everyone waited patiently for the critical moment to arrive.

Some cultists in the observation room shook in anticipation, while others held themselves stock still as if the impending show was just another tuesday.

For Ves, this event became a pivotal moment in his life. This was the first time he designed a mech that expressly spit on the face of the MTA and its ethical principles. It made him feel both mischievous and naughty for partaking in such an evil project.

"Why don't I feel guilty?"

Ever since his loss of innocence, it became easy for Ves to switch off his guilt. However, reversing this switch did nothing to turn him back to the old Ves. The decision to shed his principles had left an indelible mark on his conscious.

"I've crossed the Rubicon. What's done is done."



Sadness crept up from the back of his mind. He silently lamented the high ideals he used to hold in high regard. Yet he did not regret his decision even as he mourned what he lost. What he gained should more than make up for what he paid.

Ves was a different mech designer now.

He snorted when he compared his evolution to the one he tried to instill in Ketis. Ves tried to instill the mindset of a civilized mech designer into her, while Ves voluntarily took on the traits of a frontier mech designer.

They were two completely different mech designers who moved into opposite directions in an attempt to improve themselves.

Whether it was a mistake to abandon the purity of their upbringing and open themselves up to new perspectives remained to be seen. At the very least, Ves considered it a net positive if he'd be able to retain all of the good influences while leaving behind some of the bad ones.

"It's starting!" Mayra uttered with an elevated breath. Even she felt some sympathy for what her mech pilot would be going through. "The neural interfaces are starting their transmissions into their central nervous system."

It was like stuffing someone's mouth with an entire cow. Their throats simply couldn't fit something so big!

Twin screams began to escape from their mouths! Ragged cries from both exposed the horror of how it felt to have your entire brains and spine burn from being overloaded with excessive amounts of input!

"C'mon! Push through the pain! Fight!" Ves whispered. Without a battle, the twisted ritual had no meaning in the eyes of the Priests. "Yes! That's it! Move!"

The screams subsided, though they never stopped. Sheer willpower forced Acolytes Gien and Evie to push through their agony and focus on the critical aspect of making sense of the glut of data their brains failed to process.

Through grit and steel, they managed to reach a fragile equilibrium. Ves couldn't imagine how they managed to do it, but every human being possessed the will to live.

Ves still couldn't believe what he witnessed in front of his eyes. Mech pilots were being brought to a slow and agonizing death by the very mechs they depended on to achieve victory. Such an abusive relationship shouldn't exist, but with the Soulless Priest's machinations and assistance from Mayra and himself, they successfully birthed a pair of abominations.

Conventional theory stated that mechs needed to be in sync with their own mech pilot to realize their full potential. However, this obviously wasn't possible in this case, causing both mech pilots to effectively experience a degradation in their effective aptitude.

Therefore, before the mech pilots could fight, they needed to master their new circumstances. Simulator sessions hadn't been enough to prepare them for the difficulties they experienced right now. They needed to become accustomed to this unique and painful circumstance as fast as possible.

"Acolyte Gien has made the first move!"

Surprisingly, Gien stopped screaming first. As soon as he cut off his uncontrollable impulses, he grit his teeth and directed his mech to begin moving. As the Evaporating Spear was a spaceborn lancer mech, Gien chose to initiate its principal form of attack.

The Evaporating Spear began to charge.

It helped that it didn't require too much output commands on his part to set the charge in motion. He only needed to dial the acceleration of his flight system

to maximum and force his mech to brace its lance within its grasp. After that, Acolyte Gien's main concern would be to keep the parameters of his mech as stable as possible while making sure it flew straight towards its opponent.

It sounded simple, but the Evaporating Spear exhibited a number of uncontrollable movements! Sometimes, its flight system sputtered, while other times its spear almost jerked away from the center.

"Acolyte Gien isn't clear-headed enough to filter out sober commands." Mayra commented.

Ves looked up at her. He picked up on a hint of familiarity in her tone. "Did you witness something like this before?"

"Not from my own mechs, thankfully." She sighed in relief. "I've witnessed this phenomenon from some of our allies and opponents. You tend to encounter these sights from some of the poorer pirate gangs. They are often short on mech technicians, or don't have any who are very good at their job, so a lot of mistakes occur in the mech workshops. Since they're so poor and weak, they don't have a mech designer on retainer to solve these issues either."

That sounded like a tragedy in the making to Ves. Such a pirate outfit wouldn't be able to survive for more than a couple of years at most.

"Let me guess." He added. "They also buy the cheapest, crappiest mechs from the shadiest dealers. Ones that have a high chance of being tampered with as well for some reason or another."

Mayra nodded. "Caveat Emptor. Buyers must be wary and knowledgeable enough to know what they are purchasing. The sad thing is that pirate gangs without their own mech designers never last very long. The number one reason for their failure is that their very own mechs have led them to their deaths."

While they were chatting, in the meantime the duel picked up steam. As the Evaporating Spear was picking up steam, the Redemption Rose did not fall behind. Acolyte Evie gained control just in time to brace her mech for a charge.

In theory, a lancer mech handedly beat a knight mech. A lancer's offensive power relied primarily on their charging attack, and the one thing they hated most was fighting against a light and mobile mech that could easily dodge the telegraphed charge without breaking any sweat.

A space knight that relied on armor instead of mobility to fend off attacks should have been a sitting duck. However, due to Mayra's extensive modifications, the mech had shed much of its armor in exchange for increased mobility.

The Redemption Rose could not be called a proper knight anymore!

"The first collision is about to happen!"

As the Evaporating Spear charged forth like a jerky rocket that nonetheless managed to maintain its course, its lance was moments away from piercing through the Redemption Rose's weakened armor!

However, the Redemption Rose abruptly engaged its flight system along with some of its miniboosters! The sudden impulse shoved the slimmed-down space knight out of the path of the Evaporating Spear's charge, causing the lancer mech to miss its target by a wide margin!

"Acolyte Gien almost succeeded." Ves commented, though he looked a little disappointed. "He even predicted that Evie would dodge, but he chose to correct his course in the wrong direction."

The Redemption Rose dodged to the right at the last second, but the Evaporating Spear had already begun to bend its lance in the other direction!

If Gien had won the guessing game, then chances were high his mech would have been able to leave a gouge in his opponent's mech!

The two mechs took some time to readjust from the first clash. The constant fire burning through their nerves caused them to take at least five times as long to turn around their mechs and ready them for the next collision.

While Acolyte Evie's Redemption Rose gained a lot of mobility, it was still a space knight at heart. The miniboosters attached to strategic points along its frame expended its fuel rather quickly, so Evie couldn't rely on them to chase after the lancer mech.

The Evaporating Spear possessed the initiative in this confrontation. It was up to the faster and more offensive-minded lancer mech to go on the attack!

And that it did. The lancer mech made an exaggerated curve until it once again ended up in a trajectory that lined up to the largely immobile space knight.

Its curving trajectory allowed the Evaporating Spear to retain the momentum it built up thus far. This was the beauty of spaceborn lancer mechs! Anytime they missed, the momentum they painstakingly built wasn't lost! They could simply arc around and try again, all the while their flight systems accelerated them to even greater relative velocities!

The greater the accumulation, the greater the kinetic energy at the moment of a successful collision! Though the lancer mech inevitably suffered just as much shock as its victim, its entire mech frame had been built to counteract the damage resulting from such impacts. Even if it suffered some damage, the mech at the other end of the lance inevitably suffered ten times worse!

Such an occurrence became increasingly more likely as Acolyte Gien tried and failed to impale the Redemption Rose for four straight times!

Some of the less well-adjusted cultists in the observation chamber began to disparage their former brother.

"Is he blind? Even if he's in pain, he shouldn't be so bad with his aim!"

"Gien is unworthy to receive Haatumak's favor. If he cannot endure the strain of piloting an uncooperative mech, he doesn't deserve to be ordained as a Living Altar."

The duel did proceed rather badly. For a lancer mech to miss so many charges at once beggared belief. However, Ves knew that this show would end soon enough, because the Evaporating Spear became more accurate after each failed attempt.

Its mech pilot was starting to get the hang of piloting under strain! Acolyte Gien began to channel his pain rather than endure it in a mindless fashion. The uncontrolled bursts of movement lessened as he began to take back more control.

As the Evaporating Spear curved back for another charge, this time it moved with purpose!

### **Chapter 706 Degraded Minds**

The next charge had the potential to end the duel. The momentum the Evaporating Spear built up after successive failed charges had reached a dreadful level!

This made it harder for it to change course, but it also forced the Redemption Rose to start dodging sooner, lest it moved too late!

In essence, the battle turned into a game of prediction. Would Acolyte Gien and Acolyte Evie be able to outguess each other? So far, Evie managed to dodge her mech in a different direction than her opponent, but in games of chance a lucky streak always reached an end.

The decisive moment approached. Both Gien and Evie stimulated their will to live, allowing them to fight through the pain of overloaded nerves in order to exert control over their mechs.

Even as the Church subjected them to this punishment, they never lost their pride as mech pilots! No matter the circumstances, they never lost their drive to win!

"Fight! You can do, it Gien!" Ves softly cheered from the observation chamber. He became invested in the match. He wanted his mech to succeed against Mayra's work.

An invisible wake followed after the Evaporating Spear, which had sped up to an unimaginable level. The Redemption Rose that opposed it calmly braced its spear and readied its depleting minibooters for one more dodge.

Seconds passed as the next collision became imminent. Hundreds of meters away from impact, the Redemption Rose abruptly dodged downwards!

However, this time the Evaporating Spear adjusted its course downwards as well!

It was too late to change for the Redemption Rose to change its trajectory! Realizing the danger, Acolyte Evie abruptly shut down the boosters while adjusting the angle of her shield.

**BOOM!**

A silent explosion occurred as the lancer mech successfully hit a solid target ten minutes into the duel!

Acolyte Gien fought long and hard against his pain, and time was running out for him. If he missed this attempt, he might not be able to maintain control over his fast-moving mech for long.

He needed to secure a hit!

Shards of alloy and other kinds of debris spread from the point of impact. Two mechs spun away in different directions, each of them coming off worse than before.

"The Redemption Rose is worse off!"

Mayra's space knight sacrificed protection for mobility, but that didn't avail it much in this phase of the battle. The confrontation between a speeding lance and a weakened shield left the latter in dire straits!

Nothing was left of the shield! The immense kinetic impact pretty much shattered its top half and broke the grip section, causing the partially intact bottom half to fly away into space.

However, the lance surprisingly shattered as well. Its entire forward section snapped apart, causing the Evaporating Spear to impact the frame of the opposing mech with the stump of its shortened lance!

"Damn, I should have spent some time on strengthening that lance!" Ves cursed. "I never thought that Acolyte Gien would miss more than four times in a row."

Since the initial impact bled off a lot of kinetic energy, the stump of the lance hit one of the shoulders of the Redemption Rose with reduced force! The shoulder splintered from the impact with the stump, but the damage hadn't been enough to disable the arm!

As the passing Evaporating Spear tried to recover from the impact, the space knight recovered first and followed in pursuit! Acolyte Evie knew that if she wanted to win, she needed to take over the initiative!

Her space knight might be slower than a lancer mech, but Mayra's modifications had closed the gap. In addition, Evie saved a substantial amount of fuel for her minibooters for exactly such a situation. As the



boosters expended their last remaining reserves, the Redemption Rose rapidly caught up to the Evaporating Spear!

Ves could read the writing on the wall. "The Redemption Rose will catch up before the Evaporating Spear can accelerate away."

The lancer mech lost too much of its forward momentum upon collision. It also spun away in an uncontrollable fashion, forcing Acolyte Gien to perform complex and straining correction maneuvers in order to halt the spin. All of these detriments prevented the Evaporating Spear from speeding away.

That proved to be a pivotal moment in the duel.

The Redemption Duel burnt out the last reserves of its booster fuel, but all of that had been worth it because its temporary edge in speed allowed it to catch up to the lancer and entangle it with a flurry of sword strikes!

Forced to defend, the Evaporating Spear had no choice but to spin around and fend off the sword strikes with its backup spear.

The frantic, badly-executed sword strikes unleashed by Acolyte Evie weren't meant to succeed. Instead, the purpose of her offensive was to force her mech to stick to her enemy's mech as closely as possible so that the Evaporating Spear had no chance to build up to another charge.

You never let an enemy lancer mech accumulate momentum if you could help it! Evie was following established doctrine by trying to entangle the lancer with her shieldless space knight!

The battle devolved into a badly-choreographed exchange of blows. Seeing that Acolyte Evie had no intention of letting him get away, Acolyte Gien gave up trying to build up to a charge and entered the melee in earnest.

"The match is over! A lancer mech never fares as well as a space knight in close-quarters combat!"

"Don't count out Acolyte Gien yet! Do you see how he's managed to hold on up to now? He has the edge in control!"

Ves looked closer and saw that the movements of the Redemption Rose appeared energetic, but formulaic. The space knight also twitched at inopportune times, causing it to ruin its own attack routines and even landing it at risk of suffering a counter-attack at times!

He turned to Mayra. "Did you incorporate AIs in the Redemption Rose?"

"I did." Mayra admitted without hesitation. "Even if their imagination is lacking, they don't require too much effort to implement. That has left me with additional time to complete my other upgrades to the Redemption Rose."

He forgot that Mayra lacked the institutional disdain against incorporating AIs in her own mechs. Ves had long been brought up to hate the entire notion of relying on artificial minds to do the jobs of mech pilots and mech designers. AIs threatened both of their livelihoods if they became acceptable substitutes for both of their professions.

Therefore, the MTA along with nearly every mech pilot and mech designer strenuously rejected the use of AIs. Any mech designer caught with trying to popularize their use inevitably suffered an 'accident'.

Nonetheless, the other reason why AIs never saw popularity was that highly skilled mech pilots usually managed to outwit them. Their creativity possessed limits and they could emulate the spark of spontaneity that veteran mech pilots fostered into their piloting style.

Sadly for Ves and Acolyte Gien, this wasn't the case here. Both of them piloted low-quality mechs in fairly awful conditions. Despite getting a tune-up from Ves and Mayra, two days wasn't enough to repair all the damage and bad design choices their mechs had suffered from. One of the most important

weaknesses of their cheap mechs was that they exhibited fairly low reaction speeds.

This resulted in a substantially slower exchange of blows. So slow in fact that the AIs and algorithms taking over some of execution of some of the Redemption Rose's moves exerted finer control than the mech pilots themselves!

The Evaporating Spear unleashed a flurry of stabs, trying to deter the Redemption Rose from moving into its range, but the swordsman mech wasn't deterred. It willingly absorbed damage to its half-crippled shield arm in order to get into range to deliver a telling slash against the Evaporating Spear's chest.

The slash managed to score deeply into its relatively weak armor. Though the sword slash hadn't bitten deep enough to affect the internals, the entire upper chest area experienced a comprehensive weakening that set it up for subsequent attacks.

"Acolyte Gien isn't going down without another fight!"

After suffering a heavy attack, Acolyte Gien became more desperate. He could die! His only chance at rebirth could be ruined! The man screamed and willingly accepted the pain. With great effort, he increased his control over his own mech and fought back with a greater semblance of his old piloting skill!

The Evaporating Spear went on the offensive, advancing boldly towards the Redemption Rose, stabbing outwards with its sword all the while. Acolyte Evie relied heavily on the AIs to parry the incoming blows, preventing the Redemption Rose from suffering even a single scratch.

Yet even with the swordsman mech's perfect defense, it took a lot of effort for a sword to block an incoming stab. The amount of energy and movement exerted by the Redemption Rose surpassed that of the Evaporating Spear.

This stalemate benefited the spear-wielding mech more than the sword-wielding mech, especially because the latter wielded a single-handed sword.

Something catastrophically went wrong for the Redemption Rose at that time. The sword automatically moved to intercept an attack directed to its left side, but the incoming spear stab turned out to be a feint!

Acolyte Gien deliberately underutilized the use of feints just for moments like this! With great willpower, he directed the spear stab into a swipe that caused it to flick towards the Redemption Rose's unguarded right side!

However, while Acolyte Evie couldn't react fast enough to pull back the Redemption Rose's sword, the AIs didn't suffer from that problem and forcefully pushed through her hesitation.

However, Gien's control over his spear surpassed the imagination of his opponent. The spear abruptly shifted to a downwards trajectory!

A double feint!

The Evaporating Spear had held back during the previous two attempts! Only now did it truly push its strength into the attack, even overloading its flight system in an instant to obtain a greater forward push!

At this stage, the Redemption Rose started to hesitate! Its AI momentarily grew confused, but committed another shift despite having changed its mind once before. However, Evie was still stuck on the first shift! The flood of data entering her mind caused her reaction to be a tad bit slower.

For a single instant, her own reaction clashed against the solution adopted by the AIs! This caused the mech to lock up for a moment as two warring commands fought against each other to move the sword in one direction or another. The mech couldn't decide who to listen to!

Acolyte Gien's spear stabbed deeply past the ineffective sword and pierced through the chest armor of the Redemption Rose!

Due to the double-feint, the stab carried less kinetic energy than Gien preferred, but the tip of the spear still managed to penetrate the chest armor and deal a shallow amount of damage to the Redemption Rose's internals.

However, even though Mayra removed a lot of defensive power from the space knight, it still retained the robust internal structure of a defensive mech! Its redundancy level was considerate compared to offensive mechs, so despite damaging a few channels and subcomponents, the Redemption Rose hardly lost any power!

The successful attack might have succeeded in damaging the Redemption Rose, but the space knight still retained its ability to fight. On the other hand, Acolyte Gien had pushed his mind beyond its ordinary limitations. The greater performance of his Evaporating Spear came at a fatal cost!

"Aagh.. I.. can't.. take.. it!" He uttered from his cockpit.

The Evaporating Spear never matched its earlier performance. Gien expended far too much mental energy when he tried and failed to charge down the Redemption Rose. When the duel turned into an exchange of blows, Gien constantly had to exert his mind to keep up.

In contrast, while Acolyte Evie suffered from a greater flood of junk data, she didn't have to think too hard to pilot her mech. The presence of the AIs in her mech allowed her to issue simple commands to hold the Evaporating Spear off. Clever commands at the right timing managed to save the Redemption Rose from complete destruction!

"It's over! Gien is at the end of his rope, while Evie is still strong enough to last a couple more minutes!"

The performance of the Evaporating Spear weakened by the second as the strain of controlling the mech manually became too much of a burden for his steadily degrading nerves.

Technically, Evie suffered from the same problem, but the difference was that the AIs cared little about nerve damage. They functioned just as well if Evie was completely healthy or had almost fried her brains to a crisp!

The battle turned from a battle of wills to a battle between a half-vegetable and a cold-hearted set of AIs.

The Redemption Duel came at an end when the Redemption Rose knocked off the spear from the grip of the sluggish Evaporating Spear. Defenseless, the lancer mech failed to push the space knight back as it mechanically thrust its sword through the cockpit section.

#### **Chapter 707 Gracious Response**

Acolyte Evie won!

Ves turned towards Mayra and bowed his head. "Congratulations on your mech pilot's win. Your Redemption Rose has vanquished my Evaporating Spear."

"The duel was too close to call." She said graciously. Still, she couldn't help but smile at her victory. "The quality of our mechs are roughly at the same level. We chose to emphasize different aspects of our mechs, and the only reason why the Redemption Rose took the advantage is because we dealt with the neural interface issue in different ways."

"That's true." He nodded. "I've chosen to limit the amount of input, while you've opted to rely on AIs to maximize the output. I should have gone for this solution as well, but I guess I was too prideful in my own methods."

Besides his ingrained bias towards relying on artificial intelligences, Ves also opted against them because they didn't fit with his design philosophy.

Ves in fact contemplated whether his design philosophy had room for autonomous mechs. It seemed self-evident that if Ves would be able to bring mechs to 'life' one day, that they be able to gain the ability to move by themselves.

He opted against such a future. At the very least, he did not wish his mechs to gain autonomy from a mind based on data rather than spirituality.

A small intuitive feeling made him feel as if the best way for him to go forward was to continue to work around the unity of mech, mech designer and mech pilot. The entire X-Factor centered around an alignment of their strengths. If Ves started cutting out the mech pilot out of the equation, why wouldn't mech designers be made irrelevant as well one day?

Ves did not wish to become an archenemy of the MTA and virtually every mech designer in existence by pursuing autonomous mechs! He'd be dead so fast once a battleship dropped a bunch of anti-matter bombs over his head!

The MTA wouldn't hesitate to wipe out the planet he was residing at if that was what it took to eliminate the scourge of self-operating mechs!

Therefore, after a long moment of introspection, Ves still considered mech pilots to be a vital partner to the mechs he designed.

He had witnessed the strength of the man-machine connection first-hand. It was not his goal to saw off one of the legs of that partnership. Instead, he wanted to strengthen the other leg so that the combination stood more firmly.

Such a stance benefited high-end mechs piloted by elite pilots the most. If Ves chose to go the other way, then he would be able to excel at designing low-end mechs meant for mass production.

"They're retrieving Acolyte Evie." Ves noted as he gestured his hand towards the projection that showed the two tow mechs grabbing hold of the

immobilized Redemption Rose. "I wonder how much is left of her after this duel."

"Not much." Mayra shook her head. "Poor girl. She's rather young for an acolyte, and if she joined the Swordmaidens she would have enjoyed a brighter future. What the worshippers of Haatumak do to the winners of this Redemption Duel.. only they would consider it a redemption. To us, akin to damnation to become a Living Altar."

She obviously knew more than Ves, but with Acolytes Villis and her own minder standing close by, Mayra wouldn't reveal anything more.

The end of the Redemption Duel marked the end of their involvement and whatever emotional attachment they placed in their mech pilots. Mayra won while Ves fell short. He had nothing against the Swordmaiden mech designer for besting him. He even found it to be an honor to acquit himself well against a Journeyman.

He only wondered whether the Church thought the same. They initially told him that they Acolyte Gien didn't necessarily have to win for him to receive his rewards. If the duel excited their god, then both mech designers stood to gain their rewards.

As cultists started to depart from the observation chamber, Ves calmly continued chatting with Mayra while he waited for the final verdict.

The hatch suddenly slid open after some time. The Soulless Priest himself had come to greet the mech designers.

"Mayra of the Swordmaidens. Congratulations are in order."

She bowed to the Priest. "Acolyte Evie deserves all the praise. I merely provided the tools."



"As you say. Rewards are in order. I think you will find our offerings exceedingly satisfying."

The two older mech designers chatted a bit, though Ves found it difficult to follow their conversation as they only referred to important matters with euphemisms and code names.

Eventually, the Soulless Priest spared a single glance at Ves, not that he could read the man's expression as it was shrouded in shadow.

"Mr. Larkinson."

"Yes, sir?"

"Your mech has failed."

That was laying it thick. Ves instinctively felt his pride creeping up at him, but he pushed it down. It was never a good idea to act like Ketis in front of more experienced mech designers.

Ves had the feeling the Soulless Priest tested him once again. He needed to be careful of what he said. "The Evaporating Spear performed admirably in the hands of Acolyte Gien. Their combination closely matched the pairing of the Redemption Rose and the Acolyte Evie. Victory and defeat shifted back and forth but eventually Evie had the benefit of retaining her battle effectiveness longer."

"You made the wrong design choice." The Soulless Priest spoke. He did not need to specify which design choice Ves had gone wrong. "Your ingrained aversions to certain solutions is a shackle that will limit your capabilities."

"I do not agree." He responded. "You are right that limiting myself will restrict my choices, but that only means I can focus on improving the tools that are still in my grasp."

The conversation strayed in the age-old debate between specialisation and generalization. It was a debate neither mech designers wanted to stray into, because it was impossible to come to a consensus on the matter.

"I admire your convictions. At the very least, you are willing to stand up for your beliefs even if they are misguided." The Soulless Priest quickly activated his comm and flicked a virtual invitation card to Ves. "Here you go. I won't have you departing from the Temple of Haatumak empty-handed. As for the discount, your colleague Mayra has already won that in your alliance's stead."

"Thank you, sir!" Ves grinned. He constantly worried about whether he had earned the Soulless Priest's approval.

"Don't thank me. Praise Haatumak's generosity."

"Err.. okay."

Once the Soulless Priest departed from the observation chamber, their Acolyte escorts led Ves and Mayra to depart from the Temple of Haatumak. After meeting up with some familiar Swordmaidens and Vandals who looked as if they went through the wringer, they both split up and returned to their own ships.

Their visit to the Temple of Haatumak came to an end. The Flagrant Swordmaiden officers all partook in various rituals and ceremonies, and their collective performance largely pleased the cultists.

This was why on the way home, various Priests boarded Church-owned shuttles and flew towards the various ships of the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet.

The Priests were on their way to uphold their end of the bargain, which was to bless the Vandal and Swordmaiden ships with some kind of sorcery that prevented the sandmen aliens from detecting them at long range!

"Was all of this worth it?" Ves asked to Chief Avanaeon, who sat next to him in the shuttle again. "A lot of weird stuff went on aboard the Temple. I'm not sure what we're getting in return is worth the emotional damage we've sustained."

"We'll just be suffering a couple of nightmares at most, and we have pills for that." Avanaeon remarked without concern. He held up a lot better than some of his colleagues, who looked as if they still saw ghosts. "The Swordmaidens told us what to expect. If we can save a large amount of K-coins by participating in their sick games, it's well worth the pain."

The Flagrant Vandals still couldn't shake off their money-grubbing instincts. If someone offered something for free in exchange for a few favors, they'd take the bait without any hesitation.

Once their shuttle returned to the Vandal flagship, every Vandal breathed easily once they returned to familiar ground. The abundant lighting, the clean, filtered smells, the bots that kept the deck and bulkheads clean and tidy, the lack of prayer sounds, the absence of idols and religious iconography, and above all else being surrounded by fellow Vandals who didn't creepily hide their bodies beneath voluminous robes reassured them all that they returned to familiar soil.

"Home sweet home." Someone uttered, and everyone who visited the Temple agreed to that sentiment.

Everyone needed a touch of normality after witnessing so many bizarre sights. Ves returned to the armory along with the other Vandals. He changed out of his extravagant suit of armor in favor of a standard underlayer vacsuit with his sober and boring green uniform on top. Although his piratized outfit looked incredibly dashing, the Vandals weren't pirates who judged each other by how formidable they appeared.

"This is one pirate habit that I'm eager to get rid off." He huffed as he stowed his custom set of armor in a secure locker.

Another day went by as Ves returned to his routine. While he caught up on his paperwork and issued some new revised designs to his subordinates, the Haatumak Priests each conducted an elaborate ceremony on every ship. This took some time as they needed to spread their blessings on both the combat carriers and all of the logistics ships and smaller transports whose only purpose was to carry their supplies.

When a robed Priest stepped aboard the Shield of Hispania and threw some incense smoke around, Ves paused from his backlog of work and entered the hangar bay where the worshipper performed his ceremony.

A gaggle of Vandal ratings and officers stood well out of the way, staring at the robed Priest as he muttered some incomprehensible words interspersed with praise for Haatumak.

"What is that fellow muttering about?"

"I don't know. The only word I recognize is Haatumak."

"Do you think Haatumak really exists?"

"Beats me. He might as well be an alien who hoodwinked these gullible idiots."

"Shhh! Don't insult those crazies while he's working his magic! Misguided or not, their 'blessing' is the real deal!"

Many Vandals found it difficult to process how the robed Priest accomplished this effect in the first place. The sandmen were a menace that posed an existential threat to all concentration of forces. The larger the force, the greater the odds of attracting the sandmen.

Still, many of them couldn't figure out what kind of secret the Church of Haatumak employed to circumvent this disaster. Ves himself spent a lot of minutes staring at the Priest. None of his senses including his sixth sense detected anything unusual.

He suspected that the Priest was merely speaking gobbledygook and waving around his incense holder in order to hoodwink their clients.

Ves stepped back from the front row and put some bodies between him and the Priest. He had an awful suspicion about what really went on.

He activated his recently-discovered spiritual vision for a single second. During that time, he swiveled around his head as if he sought a familiar friend.

His enhanced vision captured the presence of several invisible robed figures in the hangar bay!

Each of them stood behind an important figure to the Vandals! One of them followed behind Major Verle, while another trailed after Lieutenant Commander Soapstone like a haunted ghost. Chief Technician Haine's exuberant gestures while she chatted with her fellow mech technicians forced her personal stalker to weave and dodge.

For some reason, the invisible cultists preferred to stay in extremely close proximity to their subjects. It was creepy and unnatural and Ves couldn't tell whether they were invisible or intangible.

Worst of all, when Ves swept his view, he also caught a glimpse of a presence behind his back! He hadn't managed to catch the complete form of his stalker, but he recognized the form and shape of the dark robe.

Acolyte Villis!

There was no doubt about it! He recognized her hunched form and ratty dark robes anywhere! Just thinking about her presence right behind his back gave him the creeps!

This wasn't part of the deal!

### **Chapter 708 Uninvited Guests**

The invisible cultists stayed when the Priest finally finished his show. The Church-owned shuttle departed from the Shield of Hispania's hangar bay with a lot less passengers than they initially brought inside.

Every important Vandal was being haunted by their personal stalker. Ves was no different, as Acolyte Villis continued to follow him even after he left the hangar bay and returned to his office.

Having witnessed the negotiation between Major Verle, Commander Lydia and the Coinlord, he knew for certain that the Vandals and the Swordmaidens never agreed to host invisible ghosts from the Church of Haatumak!

For a moment, Ves began to doubt himself. Did his spiritual vision lie to him? Did it conjure up an illusion that only existed in his imagination, or had the cultists truly planted hidden agents amongst their fleet?

If his vision hadn't lied to him, then the presence of these uninvited guests might invite ruin to their fleet!

They could do a lot of damage to the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens if they kept up their spying act. Not only would they be able to read anything they read and hear anything they heard, but Ves suspected that these invisible presences could easily turn into assassins if necessary.

Hardly any Vandal with a follower kept up their guards against potential assassins! Why should they? This was their ship, and as far as they were aware of, no unauthorized guests had boarded the Shield.

The only person among them who didn't belong to the Vandals was Ketis, but the girl was practically the worst assassin imaginable. The little vixen couldn't stalk her way anywhere without making a racket due to the various tribal accessories adorning her regular outfit.

In essence, their invisible stalkers had the potential to cause an enormous amount of harm to their operations. They could either pass on the information they obtained by eavesdropping on their targets, or they could get their hands dirty and perform some sabotage while everyone else was blind to their presence.

The possibilities were limitless as long as they kept up their strange form of stealth!

"Damn it." He muttered softly to himself. He had to watch what he said aloud because Acolyte Villis was practically breathing behind his neck right now!

Right now, he hated his position. Being the head designer of the task force sounded great on his resume, but it also warranted a personal spy from the worshippers of Haatumak!

While Ves couldn't pin down why these crazies assigned their invisible acolytes to the Vandals, he suspected they were up to no good.

Soon enough, they would find out about the Starlight Megalodon. The cultists might even be following behind the heels of the Flagrant Swordmaidens. Once they inadvertently led the Temple of Haatumak to the Starlight Megalodon, the cultists could easily cripple the Flagrant Swordmaidens and take the prizes inside the Starlight Megalodon for themselves!

And the worst thing about it was that Ves couldn't warn Major Verle or anyone important about the potential threat that lingered behind their backs! Who knew what might happen if Ves tipped them off about the presence of their stalkers.

Before he composed a plan to deal with their uninvited guests, Ves tried to remain calm and show as little apprehension as possible. He wasn't supposed to feel frightened in the familiar confines of the Shield of Hispania. This was his home for several months, so he tried hard not to act too jumpy, lest Acolyte Villis suspected that he knew more.

Unfortunately, he hadn't quite succeeded at suppressing his nervous impulses. It got so bad that Ketis frowned at him from her desk.

"What's wrong, teacher? Ever since you got back from the Temple of Haatumak, you've been.. strange."

"It's nothing for you to concern yourself about." Ves quickly replied while leisurely waving his hand. "By the way, why are you here? Aren't you supposed to work on finishing your miniature?"

"Hah! I just finished it yesterday!" She boasted, and rummaged through a drawer in order to retrieve a fairly impressive-looking scale model of his Marc Antony Mark I design. "You can check the logs if you want, but I'm telling you I made this without blowing through my budget!"

"I'll take your word for it for now, but I'll be sure to check the logs as well as the security recordings."

As Ves received the hefty miniature that Ketis produced, he could tell it had come from her hand. The work looked fairly exquisite in some places, but he also spotted a lot of minute imperfections as Ketis assembled the tiny parts by hand. She obviously hadn't mastered the use of precision tools.

He didn't spare her from her mistakes. "The way you put these parts together is too forced. I can tell you made some mistakes that cascaded in a slew of misalignments. If you fabricated a full-scale mech, the entire end product will be skewed because you're not respecting its tolerances!"



The tolerances of a full-scale mech were relatively generous. Mech designers took into account that they often endured a lot of damage during the course of their life cycle. Battle damage along with routine wear and tear eventually knocked some parts out of place. A mech had to be robust enough to keep functioning even if some parts moved by a couple of millimeters from their place.

However, the tolerances of a mech mostly scaled according to their size. A mech that shrunk by a hundred times featured tolerances that were also a hundred times tighter. This massively increased the difficulty of assembling the parts, and hence served as a useful to Ketis who probably never had to worry too much about the tolerances of her own designs.

Once he finished lecturing Ketis about her oversight, he soothed her bruised ego by handing out the praise she deserved. "At the very least, practicing with the 3D printer has improved your fabrication skills. I'm impressed by how fast you've become proficient in handling the machine, and I'm further impressed by how you tweaked the design of the Marc Antony Mark I to retain some of its functionality even if it's shrunk to this size."

Ves placed the miniature on his desk and pulled up his comm. He executed a remote control program that allowed him to connect to the control module built in place of the cockpit. Within a minute, he remotely piloted the miniature and had it walk back and forth over his desk.

"Getting this little toy to walk is quite an accomplishment. As long as you are capable of getting this far with a miniature, then fabricating a full-sized mech by hand is just a step away."

"Hey! I can already do that, you know! You just haven't given me a chance!"

He disagreed, but he didn't feel like arguing the point right now. The issue of their uninvited guests weighed heavily on his mind even now. With that old crone proverbially eyeing him like a hawk,

Acolyte Villis wouldn't follow him to the shower, would she?

What about the toilet?

The answer he came up with made him glower. He had somewhat accepted that he would never enjoy any privacy in the presence of the Flagrant Vandals, but at least they possessed some integrity.

It was impossible for the Vandal security officers to peep on each and every person in the fleet. They likely left much of the actual watching to AIs that were programmed to watch out for suspicious activities.

Ves couldn't come up with such a reassuring excuse when it came to his personal stalker.

As Ves handed out a new assignment to Ketis to keep her busy and resumed handling his regular mech-related affairs, he mulled over Villis' identity.

She was far from a simple worshipper. That he knew after several days of interacting with her and seeing her interact with others. Every other Acolyte flinched away from the old woman, though the Priests still treated her like air. What was her true status? Why was she still an Acolyte at her age?

Most of all, why was she assigned to Ves?

He couldn't come with solid answers to his questions, but he could make a guess. Back at the Temple, when Ves worked on the Evaporating Spear, he always had the sense that Acolyte Villis never became confounded at what he did. No matter how technical and complicated his work turned out to be, Villis kept staring intently at him.

It was as if she understood mechs as deeply as any other mech designer.

He couldn't help but frown even deeper. If Willis possessed a technical background, which was rare but not impossible in the frontier, then Ves wouldn't be able to hide anything from her sight.

The only reason why he hadn't erupted into a full-blown panic was because there was a minute chance that this was all a figment of his imagination. And even if they were not, he still managed to come up with a couple of plans to guard against any tricks the uninvited guests might pull off.

"I'll have to accelerate my side projects. I need to complete both of them to increase my odds of survival."

Mercifully, once the Priests of Haatumak finished 'blessing' all of their ships, the Flagrant Swordmaidens didn't stick around for long. They instantly moved towards the nearest Lagrange point and muscled every other independent pirate vessel aside in their haste to jump out of the Mortose System.

During this time, Ves struggled to pretend he was oblivious to the presence of outsiders aboard the ship. The best way for him to cope with the burden was to immerse himself into his research projects.

He spent the majority of his time combing over the study materials provided by the Skull Architect. The materials on stealth tech remained as threadbare as always while the research papers on ultracompact batteries always left him with a headache after an hour's worth of study.

"This isn't going to work. My progress is too slow. I'll never be able to digest this much knowledge within a single year, let alone a month or two!"

Ves needed to come up with a better way to internalize the knowledge locked within the extracts and research papers.

He already figured out that he processed the papers faster if he let his mentality become contaminated by the research philosophies locked within the pages.

This was basically akin to cracking open a vacuum-sealed hazard suit in order to let in more toxic air. Sampling a bit of unfiltered toxic air wouldn't damage his body by much, but if he went too far then he might have irreparably damaged his hazard suit to the point where he couldn't seal it up again!

Obviously, such an approach came with an exceeding amount of risks. The only reason why he got away with it with nothing but a couple of vague impulses was because he never dove very deeply into this research field before.

He might not be so lucky next time.

At some point, he paused his study session and leaned back against his chair while nursing his forehead. "What are the mechanics behind mental contamination?"

He decided to dive in deeper into this particular topic. The local database stored on the Shield might not be as extensive as the central database of the Mech Corps, but it stored a lot of basic documentation on the dangers surrounding this phenomenon.

"To teach is to impart knowledge or provide instruction to someone."

The definition sounded simple, but when it came to knowledge taught from the heart of a strong-willed instructor, that knowledge became tinged with that person's personal feelings and biases.

This possibility strayed into the definition of a related but more nefarious word.

"To indoctrinate is to teach a person or a group to accept a set of beliefs uncritically."

High-level researchers and mech designers always exhibited an extreme amount of passion and belief in their own work. Some of them disseminated their knowledge a little too enthusiastically, to the point where the line

between fact and opinion started to blur. The more advanced and abstract the research topic, the more their own beliefs gained prominence.

Since researchers always felt biased in favor of their own research, almost every time they disseminated their research, they couldn't help but push their own points of view. It didn't matter that their audience might not be mature enough to reflect critically on the knowledge they absorbed!

Like sponges, the students absorbed the knowledge being force-fed to them by their teachers no matter if it was water or blood!

### **Chapter 709 Academic Battle Arena**

"A word that's closely related to indoctrination is brainwashing."

The good thing about brainwashing was that it sounded so obviously nefarious that the people subjected to them knew to put on their guard. This was why brainwashing only worked these days when accompanied by force or sophisticated technology.

Indoctrination, which was brainwashing's marginally more acceptable cousin, worked more insidiously because few students were sober enough to put up their guard when it happened.

Teachers taught knowledge. Yet nobody said this knowledge consisted of pure, unbiased facts and widely-accepted beliefs.

Sometimes, even if the scientific community came to a consensus on those widely-accepted beliefs, a deviant thinker might have come up with an even better theory, but failed to gain acceptance due to existing inertia.

In fact, many researchers faced a lot of doubt and skepticism, especially when they came up with radically new or subversive beliefs!

"Once upon a time on Old Earth, people believed their world was flat. A visionary known as Galileo came up with the theory that it was round, yet did

the people and the established institutions believe him? No! They called him crazy!"

An uncountable amount of visionaries, scientists and inventors faced the same storm of criticism whenever they advanced something new that was out of the scope of the public's imagination.

Even the initial emergence of mechs almost flopped due to the universal ridicule their inventors received. If not for the heroic efforts of the pioneers along with the emergence of the MTA, mechs would have never become humanity's principal war machines of the Age of Mechs.

The point was that almost every scrap of advanced knowledge was mired in some form of controversy or another. The advancement of cutting-edge knowledge at the forefront of the sciences resembled a chaotic battlefield where scientists ruthlessly fought to convince others of the validity of their beliefs!

If the researchers managed to convince enough of their peers that their beliefs had merit, it transformed into accepted theory. However, these success stories became exceedingly rare at this day and age. Researchers had to climb over millions of failures and thousands of rivals in order to gain acknowledgment from the scientific community.

"The lucky ones spend as much time in converting others to their beliefs than performing actual research." Ves observed. "Those with worse luck have to spend the majority of their time on gaining new converts."

Convincing intelligent, self-confident peers who held their own set of beliefs often turned out to be an up-hill battle. Researchers looking to gain support for their beliefs either had to come up with something decisively convincing, or they could start with defenseless children.

Young students attending universities and recent graduates looking to specialize even further became the favored suckers for these kinds of desperate researchers. They were smart enough to possess potential but lacked the accumulation to guard their minds and retain their original thoughts.

"People in my age group and life phase are prime targets for indoctrination!" He uttered as his eyes widened in realization. "Our foundation is deep enough but our minds are still too shallow, leaving us ripe for the picking to any researcher who wants to build up support!"

By necessity, these researchers became proficient in indoctrinating students and the like with their complex, multi-layered research publications. Anyone who hadn't sufficiently kept up their guards became slowly more sympathetic to the viewpoints espoused by the researcher.

They were being indoctrinated without knowing it because they forgot to think critically!

It wasn't as if the more unscrupulous research publications prodded their readers to cast doubt on the beliefs espoused from within. Research findings along with statistics could be presented in a myriad of deceptive ways.

"Almost every researcher is taking part in this race. Modesty will get them nowhere, not in a galaxy filled with rivals who can catch up to them at any time."

This pattern went on for thousands of years, spanning multiple Ages and continuing to thrive so long as researchers continued to convert more followers. At this stage, the scientists have become incredibly skilled in the art of indoctrination.

"You could say that teaching has become indistinguishable from indoctrination at this height."

Ves felt sad when he came to this conclusion. When Ves injected knowledge in his mind after purchasing various Skills and Sub-Skills from the System, he never truly encountered something controversial.

Now he realized that the System only dabbled in established theories and widely-supported models. This enabled him to assimilate the purest branches of a given field, but cut him off from the most cutting-edge of research. It also blocked him from immersing himself in more advanced applications of knowledge that had not yet gained acceptance.

"It's like I'm designing boring mechs. They're safe to pilot and come with rounded performance, but they're too bland for many people to like. Confining myself to established theories is as colorless as eating a nutrient pack each day. This is no way for me to excel."

Mech designers were often attracted to extreme pieces of knowledge. They willingly embraced unsupported beliefs as long as they could use it to design better mechs.

It all centered around their design philosophies. If they wanted it to bloom, then they were practically compelled to seek out unorthodox sources of knowledge. The reason why higher-ranking mech designers became eccentric was because their design philosophy was built on a foundation of beliefs!

"Every design philosophy is a house of cards! It only takes a single shock for all of it to collapse!"

Ves understood now what he was dealing with and how reckless he approached the issue. He toyed with knowledge beyond his ken, unaware of how insidious they wormed their way into his mind.

The main issue facing Ves right now was that he lacked sufficient depth and understanding in the fields of stealth tech and ultracompact energy storage



tech. How could he maintain a critical mind if Ves lacked the prerequisite knowledge to base his judgement of what he read?

"It's like I've mastered parts one to three of a book series, but now I'm saddled with someone's version of part fifteen! I'm missing too much in between to provide me with a good foundation on what is going on in part fifteen!"

The result was that Ves had to take the latest author's word for what truly went on in part fifteen, because Ves lacked the content to call out potential inaccuracies or cast doubt on dubious passages.

This was what it was like for those below Journeyman Mech Designers to access knowledge way above their limitations.

For some reason, the mech industry treated Journeymen as if they possessed much greater resistance against mental contamination. Was it merely a matter of accumulation, or had their design philosophy gained enough strength to withstand the demonic whispers of foreign research philosophies?

"Both are probably the case. Journeymen are just better at everything in almost every aspect compared to Apprentices. I've got to find a way to advance as fast as possible."

Ves gained a lot of progress from his short period of study into this topic. He constructed a model of how mental contamination worked and became enlightened how much of the scientific community insidiously utilized indoctrination to gain new converts.

While these insights didn't help him process the research papers faster, he could still formulate some means to cope with his sluggish progress.

"If I lack the prerequisite foundation to think critically on what I'm currently trying to learn, then why not draw from the opinions of another researcher? It would be great if I can gather the research papers of two opposing scientists!"

The Skull Architect hadn't passed too many research papers to Ves, but a lot of them came from different experts in the field. Each author possessed their own opinions, and now that he thought about it, they spent much of their time arguing for or against the assertions made by other experts!

Ves slapped his palm against his face. "I should have figured this out! The research papers are interconnected!"

He turned his attention back to his console and summoned up a second projection alongside his primary one. He opened up a different research paper in both projections and laid them side-by-side. Just minutes after he scrolled through both documents, he leaned back and laughed.

"Hahahaha! So this is it! This is the right approach! It's a shortcut!"

He would have never come up with such an idea if he hadn't taken a step back from his intensive study session.

As someone who used to be a student, he was accustomed to reading a pile of literature by their order of publication. However, that was the wrong approach to take here, because another researcher's retort or follow-up to an older paper might be published several years or even decades later.

Once Ves sorted the research material by topic rather than date, and put together two contrasting papers written by bitter rivals in their field, his progress accelerated enormously.

Putting the two research papers side-by-side and reading them concurrently made him feel as if he gained a front-row seat to an academic brawl of epic proportions!

Subtle words as soft as silk addressed to other research turned out to be brutal kicks and punches.

The academics basically tried to beat each other up in the academic arena in order to prove whose beliefs held up the longest against a sustained barrage of attacks.

Deductions and extrapolations of empirical data became their weapons of choice, though they weren't above resorting to highly educated guesswork as dirty moves.

The point for Ves was that the battle between two diametrically-opposed researchers revealed which pieces of knowledge he could trust and which he needed to treat with a grain of salt!

He just needed to see what the researchers agreed on and which beliefs they criticised intensely.

Naturally, relying on the testimony of two different individuals didn't mean that the consensus was right. Ves still needed to corroborate the specific theories with as many research papers in his possession.

The more he cross-referenced a specific theory, the more he gained confidence in his ability to judge the amount of support each theory held.

That didn't mean that each theory that Ves encountered received corroboration from the other papers in his possession. A significant amount of them referenced papers that the Skull Architect hadn't seen fit to pass on to him. This slowed him down somewhat, but with the support of the other theories he had already deciphered, he started to get the hang of looking at them with a critical eye.

"My progress will be ten times faster with this method!"

Mental contamination still posed a significant threat to him. Putting two opposing beliefs side-by-side caused sparks that sometimes spilled over to Ves, much to his pain. His headaches intensified, but he grit his teeth and

bore through them all because he gained the most insights when the battle reached its climax.

The feeling he got at the end of the day made all of his suffering worth the struggle. His understanding advanced by leaps and bounds, and the more he mastered the theories, the less strain he received from reading through the theories he hadn't touched as of yet.

Like a snowball rolling down a snow-capped mountain, his accumulation ceaselessly grew larger and larger.

The only detriment to his obsessive study sessions was that he began to neglect his other duties a little. Several times, Ketis had to shake him from his addictive preoccupation in order to receive a new assignment.

"You're not being a very good teacher, you know." She pouted as she rested her fists against her waist. "Lately you've turned into a zombie, seeing how you spend all your time staring at those documents all day."

"Sorry." Ves chuckled awkwardly as scratched his head and tried to shake the cobwebs from his mind. "I've been preoccupied with the academic arena. It's a lot more violent and engaging than I thought."

"Really? You aren't yanking my chain, are you?"

"You've only studied from widely-read and well-edited textbooks so far, which spoon feed you all of the knowledge in the most logical and reader-friendly fashion possible. At your level, the science is pretty much settled, so there's no controversy to be found. Once you become a Journeyman like Mayra, you'll have to learn that you can't trust any random theory off the street."

Ves proceeded to lecture how Ketis or any other mech designer ought to regard advanced knowledge, much to her consternation. She wasn't interested in becoming a bookworm!

## Chapter 710 Mastering a Tech

The Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet left the Mortose System behind and ventured deeper into the frontier. After completing a transaction with the Church of Haatumak, they held no more intentions of meeting any of the other local pirate factions in the frontier.

From now on, the combined allied fleet intended to avoid as many pirates as possible while they navigated towards the elusive Starlight Megalodon. They jumped from the quietest star systems possible in order to minimize the odds of encountering others, but while the Faris Star System was nearly desolate, individual pirate vessels holed up nearly everywhere.

A month flew by as the Flagrant Swordmaidens settled into an uneasy routine. For some reason, many of them felt as if they were being watched.

Most Vandals aboard the Shield of Hispania thought that one or both of the major pirate blocs placed pirate scouts along their route to keep an eye on their course.

Only Ves knew where the feeling really came from. Having spent a month under near-constant observation, he became extremely proficient in acting as if someone wasn't breathing behind his neck all this time.

What could he say? He apparently possessed a talent in acting considering how many times he behaved duplicitously.

The method he adopted worked best with the study materials related to ultracompact batteries and energy storage. That was why he focused his efforts on gaining a rudimentary understanding of this topic first before he turned his intellectual prowess towards stealth tech.

His progress with stealth tech proceeded slower because he possessed less diverse literature on it. His main gains came from his cooperative tinkering sessions with Chief Avanaeon.

The Chief Engineer exhibited an impressive grasp of applied sciences that synergized well with Ves.

If other duties hadn't claimed the bulk of their schedules, they would have been able to spend more time with the stealth shuttle fragments. For now, their primary duties took precedence over their research into deciphering the workings of stealth tech.

As Ves walked back to his office from another collaborative session, he glanced at the Vandal mech technicians and ship ratings go about their work. The mood among the rank-and-file started to become more depressed the further they flew from the Bright Republic and civilized space in general.

The isolation and the realization that they were cut off from all forms of help had truly set in at this point.

As Ves returned to his office, he nodded towards Ketis who was tinkering with another miniature mech at this moment. After a lot of hands-on practice, she shook off her disdain towards so-called physical labor.

It was too bad her relations with the mech technicians aboard the Shield of Hispania remained a bit too tense for them to work together.

Compared to every other person on the combat carrier, Ketis held up the best against the creeping realization that they traversed an unimaginable distance from their homes.

To Ketis, Lydia's Swordmaidens was her home, and their fleet was always a single shuttle ride away whenever they dropped out of FTL. No matter how deep the allied fleet ventured into uncharted space, the young woman always kept her spirits high.

Ves wished he could feel as unconcerned as her. Home was many light-years away and the awareness that uninvited guests made themselves at home in their fleet constantly burdened his mind.

"Fuel supply is sufficient for now, but a couple more months like this and we won't have enough to return to civilized space. Other supplies remain ample considering we haven't fought any battles. Crew morale is declining, but hasn't tipped over into negative territory yet. Few still remember that our original mission is to find the Starlight Megalodon."

Ves switched from his log to status readouts of the entire mech compliment of the Vandal fleet.

"The condition of our starships are improving as patchwork repairs on their damaged armor belts has been progressing. Our mech roster is looking healthier as the revised designs I've disseminated to the other combat carriers are being realized by the mech designers and mech technicians."

Then he cast his mind on the cooperation shown so far between the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens.

"Our two forces are growing closer and more comfortable to each other. A clear separation still exists, but the passage of time has fostered the growth of mutual trust between the Vandals and the Swordmaidens. At this stage in our journey, the Swordmaidens have taken over complete primacy over our route and our interaction with the pirate outfits we meet along the way. We are firmly operating in their backyard, and the border back to civilized space is so far away that the Flagrant Vandals are pretty much at their mercy."

That last point served as a point of anxiety in some of the more paranoid Vandals. They feared an inevitable betrayal from the Swordmaidens once they achieved their objective. It would be all too easy for the all-female pirate gang to stab them in the back and leave them stranded deep within the frontier.

Ves knew for certain that Major Verle and his inner circle made precautions against that eventuality.

The only problem was that they couldn't prepare for threats they hadn't foreseen. The continued presence of their uninvited guests from the Church of Haatumak continued to confound him over the last month.

He tried various means to tip off the Vandal officers, but they were too thickheaded to understand his hints. They all thought that Ves merely jumped at shadows. He wouldn't be the first one as the frontier affected all of their nerves.

For now, Ves kept his suspicions to himself and tried to lay low. Instead, he allocated some time in experimenting with his Spirituality.

He knew that this Attribute could be applied in versatile ways. The problem was finding the right means to unlock a new application. It turned out that his reckless experimentation with his eyes was a fluke.

Every attempt to direct his spiritual energy to his nose, ears, tongue and other body parts ended in failure. They simply didn't catch on and treated the rest of his body like air. Only his eyes reacted differently, but the exact reason why eluded him. His vision had never been anything special.

With no other choice, Ves experimented with injecting his eyes with his mental energy, alternating between each of them one at a time in case anything went wrong.

He learned much from his attempts.

While his entire vision from his enhanced eye became a little woozy, he became capable of seeing things that organic and electronic eyes could never see. He saw hints of lights within the minds of other people, though they resembled tiny, formless grey flames the size of a fingertip. If he wasn't watching closely for them, he would have never caught their presence.



Some people possessed larger flames. All of the mech officers as well as the mech designers such as Ketis burned a little brighter, but the difference was hardly dramatic.

Ves figured he'd only be able to see a larger difference when he met expert pilots or high-ranking mech designers.

One remarkable feature about his spiritual vision was that he could see the flames through flesh and blood as well as other solid objects. That meant within a certain range, he could detect any living people even through thick layers of bulkheads and hull structure!

The other feature was that he was able to spot the entire forms of the invisible guests as they stalked behind the various officers. This clued him in that their particular brand of invisibility was likely based on spirituality rather than technology.

He even suspected that his spiritual vision might not even work against conventional stealth technology at all if they weren't hiding any humans. This meant that bots covered in stealth plating would still be able to creep up to him despite his enhanced vision.

The final useful feature about his vision was that it exposed the aura present on each mech. For most mechs down in the mech stables and workshop assembly bays, their auras didn't look very impressive.

The blending of many different impressions and emotions caused them to take on a muddy quality that basically confirmed what he already perceived with his sixth sense.

Only the mechs whose designs Ves had personally worked on a little more appeared more coherent, but his imprint wore out over time as clumsy mech technicians polluted the spiritual identity of the mechs with their distracted thoughts.

In short, the main benefit to his spiritual vision ability was to act as a radar against living entities. No matter what kind of stealth they used or how many layers of materials they put between Ves and themselves, he could easily spot them if he looked out for their presence.

"That shouldn't be the end of it, though."

Ves suspected that there might be more applications to his spiritual vision that he hadn't figured out yet, especially with regards to mechs. It was vastly more interesting for him to leverage his alternate vision on mechs than on other human beings.

"That's something to consider for later. Right now, I'm almost done with my research."

He grinned as he turned his attention to his terminal. His studies had borne fruit, and within a single month, he managed to digest enough of an understanding in the field of energy storage that he already made some strides towards designing an ultracompact battery.

Shaped like a fat medallion-like cylinder, it possessed the same dimensions as a slice of banana. In truth, an overwhelming portion of its structure consisted of compressed alloy. The actual energy storage parts took up a minute amount of space because they already featured an insane amount of energy density!

If Ves made them any larger, then he wouldn't be able to spend his one billion credits worth of rare exotics to fabricate three whole copies of the ultracompact batteries. These material limitations prevented him from designing anything larger.

"Still, getting this much energy out of a battery that I can carry in my hand is more than enough to satisfy my needs. Besides, it's not as if all the shielding

materials serve no purpose. Without it, it takes only one hard bump for all of it to discharge."

Even if his design only produced the most rudimentary ultracompact battery possible, it contained as much if not more energy than an entire full-sized energy cell for mechs. If anything went wrong, all of that energy might erupt, causing more damage than a mech-sized laser cannon blast!

Therefore, it was safe to say the structure of an ultracompact battery actually consisted of a vault which attempted to contain an extremely dangerous concentration of energy. Carrying them around was like carrying nuclear reactors in his pockets. The only difference was that the latter posed less risk to his life!

However, even if he called them rudimentary, his batteries differed from any other ultracompact batteries in one important aspect.

They were rechargeable!

"I'm not going to get stuck with a wonderful gadget but with no way to recharge them like with my shield generator. Even if single-use batteries have a lot more capacity than rechargeable ones, it's not worth it in the long run."

The finite amount of power for his old shield generator that he left behind always caused him to sleep uneasy. He understood that most high-tech devices distributed in the Komodo Star Sector utilized single-use ultracompact batteries. This forced the users to come back to the sellers to purchase a replacement battery, earning the profiteers a lot more money than if they sold one that could be renewed for hundreds of times.

The advantage of mastering this advanced knowledge was that Ves could choose to work with single-use or rechargeable batteries himself. While the latter was a lot more expensive to produce than the former, Ves considered the expense to be well worth the effort.

The only problem with his primitive version of the ultracompact batteries could only be recharged for a limited amount of times before the exotic materials degraded and broke apart. He couldn't do anything about this phenomenon besides increasing his understanding of the underlying technology further and utilizing much higher quality exotics for his next attempts.

"Well, they can endure around twenty whole recharge cycles, so it's not like I've wasted the money. Let's see what devices I can power with these batteries."

Ves pulled up the designs of his revised gadgets at the sides. He redesigned his stealth detector and signal jammer into souped-up versions capable of running on at least a hundred times of power than before. This came at the cost of expending a small but expensive amount of exotics that Ves had to.. borrow from the Shield of Hispania's material reserves.

Stealing from his own employers aside, the increased capabilities enabled him to enhance the two devices with several high-powered functions that would have drained a normal battery within seconds.

With the help of these two devices, Ves gained some confidence in dealing with the uninvited guests when the time came for him to make his move.