

Chapter 1291 Occams Razor

Ves could have worn one of the masks he prepared as a backup, but his intuition advised him against doing so. Masters emerged from the most capable, hardworking and smartest Seniors.

Each Master was an exceptionally grand figure within the mech industry. Though Star Designers still hovered above their heads, a Master wielded enough clout to influence the political direction of an entire state!

Such eminent figures did not get to reach their current rank by being easy to fool.

There was another reason that restrained Ves from resorting to his usual antics. Of every mech designer he met, Master Olson was not a bad person by any means. She never mistreated or exploited any of her Apprentices and subordinates that he knew of. Oleg and Horatio seemed very happy to serve their Master.

Master Olson had already reached a very enviable height in her career by following her own path. Even if she suspected that Ves benefited from some unusual help, which successful mech designer didn't enjoy some advantages?

Ves decided to be a little bit more forthcoming this time. He knew he couldn't hide his secrets completely as he continued to rise up the ranks, especially if it happened quickly. To do so against an eminent Master Mech Designer who devoted her full attention to Ves was folly!

"To be honest, I received a little push. At the start of my career, my father left me.. a little gift of sorts. The gift pointed me in a certain direction and I followed it, hence why I developed such an unusual design philosophy."

All of this was true, but Ves employed as much vagueness and misdirection he thought he could get away with. None of his words hinted that the 'little gift' was the monumental Metal Scroll of the Five Scrolls Compact!

A few seconds of silence ensued as Master Olson's incredible mind started processing and extrapolating his words.

This was what Ves wanted to see. He knew that overly-smart people tended to overthink and come up to conclusions that weren't necessarily true. He himself engaged in this behavior plenty of times when his paranoia got the better of him at times.

Master Olson probably figured that Ves received a dead Senior's legacy or something that gave him a head-start.

Gloriana's patient explanations helped a lot in helping Ves come up with this solution. She helpfully informed him of Seniors who wanted to pass on their unrealized design philosophies to a younger mech designer in order to leave a legacy behind. Ves realized that he could take advantage of an ambiguous explanation to send Master Olson in this direction, thereby avoiding more radical possibilities such as the existence of the System.

As a mech designer, Ves firmly knew that mech designers often applied Occam's razor in terms of probabilities.

What was the chance that Ves received and took advantage of a dead Senior's legacy? Maybe twenty-five percent.

What was the chance he received the presumed-destroyed incarnation of the Metal Scroll in the form of the Mech Designer System? How could his father, a space peasant and a nobody on the galactic level, obtain such a miraculous asset?

The chance was probably less than 0.000000001 percent! With such low odds, any calculating mech designer should never arrive at such an inane conclusion!

Indeed, as the seconds went by, Master Olson calmly nodded. "I see. That explains it. Whatever aid you have received seemed to be very helpful. Even if mech designers receive a formidable amount of assistance, those who reached Journeyman all do so by their own efforts. No mech designer has ever reached this height by riding on the accomplishments of others."

Ves sighed in relief. Though Master Olson hadn't been explicit, it seemed she had indeed come to a less drastic conclusion about the secret behind his rise. As long as her guesses did not stray anywhere near the System, everything else was fine!

"I know. Although I've been given a push that set me on my current specialization, all of the progress I've made since then has always been my own. The help that I've received mainly came in other forms, such as improving some of my mental attributes and to accelerate my learning of the fundamentals of mech design."

Naturally, Ves vastly understated the assistance he drew upon from the System. A Senior may be quite generous when they passed on their legacies, but even that had limits!

Fortunately, Master Olson did not seem to be interested in the specifics.

"Very well. I'm satisfied with your forthcoming. Admitting that your rise is not solely due to your own effort is important for your mentality. I have seen too many mech designers who enjoyed various advantages stall in their rise because they mistakenly believed they are heaven-sent prodigies. Misjudging their own capabilities has left many of my former rivals and peers far behind

as they are unwilling to adjust and work harder to do what is necessary to progress."

Ves nodded, accepting the wisdom in her words. "Nothing comes for free. The more you depend on outside help, the less you are capable of climbing up yourself. To reach Journeyman and Master, nobody can help you climb the last steps."

"That is very much true. It's a shame that too many mech designers have yet to realize this truth." She smiled. "Still, mech designers aren't able to get off the ground without at least some assistance. You are a good example of that. While I wanted to give you space to develop your personal design philosophy, in hindsight, I could have done more for you. Now, I feel I have contributed very little to your growth. That is my failing as your Master."

"I disagree." Ves shook his head. "The help you have given me might not be enough, but I already enjoyed plenty of help. Giving me more would only coddle me and make me complacent. I'm very thankful for benefiting from the umbrella of your name and reputation. It probably helped me out of numerous sticky situations."

Master Olson curled her lips downwards. "It is still not proper. To be frank, I estimated that you would take much longer to grow. I planned to leave you to your own devices since you were already doing well enough. I would have confined myself to occasionally giving you the guidance that you needed the most. You upended all of that by advancing to Journeyman before I could even give you your second tutoring session."

Even Masters could be wrong. They may be amazing mech designers, but they were still fallible in many ways.

"This outcome is even better. I don't see any reason to regret how I've turned out." He opined.

"What is your design philosophy, exactly?" Master Olson asked. "I have referenced the MTA's record on you, but the information there.. is not very clear."

Ves looked a little sheepish. Did she actually witness him rave about creating gods and such? That was so embarrassing!

"I may have.. been a little too hyperbolic. If you leave aside my overly-optimistic fantasies, the truth is much less.. exaggerated. At the heart of it, metaphysical man-machine symbiosis is simply a means of leveraging an unheard-of connection between mechs and their mech pilots."

He offered her the basic and limited explanation of his design philosophy. He did not refer to anything sensitive such as the X-Factor or spirituality.

Master Olson took in the explanation with hardly any questioning.

"I have studied your mech designs." She said. Of course she would. "Each of them are quite remarkable, especially since you were still an Apprentice when you designed most of them. Nonetheless, how much of the extreme variation is due to the instability inherent in most Class IX design philosophies?"

"I... my design philosophy is not exactly the easiest to work with." Ves massaged his words. "If I invest a lot in a mech design, I might be able to produce a work equal to my Aurora Titan and Transcendent Messenger. If I'm under a stricter time limit or something, then I'm not going to be able to express my full potential."

"That applies to almost every mech designer." She noted. "Nonetheless, instability is not inherently bad. It at least allows you to design mechs with qualities that are far beyond the reach of a typical Journeyman. However, inconsistency is no recipe for the future. If you want to become a Master, you will need to work towards defining the rules of your design philosophy and increase its universality."

Ves immediately became more attentive. "What exactly do Seniors have to do to become a Master? Why do so few Seniors succeed despite pouring all of their hearts and minds into their research?"

"It is not relevant for you to know that yet." Master Olson softly shook her head. "For now, you should be focused on expanding your design philosophy and developing new applications. Journeymen must adopt a curious, inquisitive and open-minded attitude to become a Senior. A substantially different mindset is needed for Seniors to advance to Master."

In other words, adopting the mindset of a Senior while he was still a Journeyman would affect his rise.

"Fair enough."

"Let us move on." She gestured with her arm. "Now that I've heard you describe your circumstances and your design philosophy, I've come to a number of decisions with regards to our future association."

The meeting arrived at the pivotal moment. Ves had a feeling that something important was about to take place.

"While you are officially registered as my apprentice, the aid that I've given you has never been very substantial. While I've given you some toys and access to the Clifford Society, I believe you would have been able to gain something similar through your own efforts."

"The stuff you've given me has been very useful, ma'am!" Ves refuted. "For example, your shield generator saved my life plenty of times!"

"That is just an insignificant gift." She waved her hand dismissively, as if shield generators were just cabbages that she could pick up from the streets!

"Let's not mince words here. You were never really my apprentice in the first place. Someone or something else has already taken that place even before you came to my attention."

"That is.. true." Ves admitted. He never really looked up to Master Olson all that much either. "I still consider you to be a very helpful teacher."

"That is a more appropriate way to describe our relationship. I have taught you, guided you and lent you a hand, but many other professors at your university can boast of doing the same."

Ves silently shook his head. The professors at the Rittersberg University of Technology were nowhere near as impressive as Master Olson!

"For this reason, I've come to a decision." She continued. "The proper course of action is to dispense with the fiction of our current association and declare an end to your apprenticeship."

Her bombshell startled Ves and put him on the backfoot. "I'll.. no longer be your Apprentice?"

"You're a Journeyman. You are more than capable of standing on your own. Don't consider my decision to be a cancellation of your status. It is actually a form of graduation. Concluding an apprenticeship upon reaching Journeyman is a regular occurrence in the mech community. It signifies that I no longer believe it is necessary for me to impart you any further knowledge. This has already been the truth for a while, but now that you have reached your current level of success, this is a good time to take this course of action."

Although she explained it in positive terms, Ves still felt as if he was being cut off. It was as if he was a teenager living with his parents, but they decided to kick him out of the house as soon as he turned eighteen and became a legal adult!

Nonetheless, this outcome was very abrupt! Why did Master Olson decide to put an end to his apprenticeship? There must be more behind this decision!

Chapter 1292 Faulty Assumptions

"What will this mean for us?" Ves asked after he regained his composure.

"We'll always share an association. Even if you are not my apprentice anymore, the mech community will still regard you as a graduate of mine, so you will still enjoy a certain amount of protection due to your past association with me. That should be enough of a parting gift."

As if Ves cared about that. She already told him that he could stand on his own as a Journeyman.

"What about the stuff I've received? To be honest, I still feel that I owe you a lot. Mech designers ought to be fair to each other, particularly when it comes to these kinds of associations. So far, I haven't paid back your generosity."

Aside from her single tutoring session, Ves substantially benefited from her reputation while also receiving a gene boost elixir and a shield generator. Though she did not seriously register their worth, they were still valuable.

He would not feel comfortable ending his apprenticeship to Master Olson without reciprocating the aid he received.

Master Olson noticed his difficulty and offered a solution. "I've seen that you haven't checked with the Clifford Society lately. You still have some merits in reserve. In order to reinforce the separation between you and I, it is best to end your membership to the Clifford Society as well. You can relinquish your merits to me while you do that. I'll consider that acceptable payment for my past assistance."

Ves frowned. "I don't understand. The Clifford Society is a club founded by the Leemar Institute of Technology, which belongs to the Carnegie Group. Shouldn't it be okay for me to continue to be a member?"

"You are not a Leemar graduate. You have no ties to the Carnegie Group, and we have just put an end to our own connection. While you are interesting enough to remain as a member due to your Journeyman status, you are too

different from the other members of the Society. Right now, it is more important for us to cut any ongoing connections to the Friday Coalition."

"Uh, what?" Confusion reigned in his mind. "Why insist on that?"

Though he hadn't made use of the Clifford Society, that did not mean it was useless. Membership to the Society offered him inside access to many of the Coalition's exclusive goods and services.

While he did not care too much for Society's voluminous libraries, Ves was loath to lose access to its extensive marketplace!

An intrigued smile appeared on Master Olson's face. "You don't have to hide it, Ves. I understand why you wish to leave your latest development out of this conversation, but it isn't as awkward as you think."

Ves wanted to scratch his head. What latest development?

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come now, Ves." Master Olson smiled. "My sources on Centerpoint have already relayed the news to me. I'm very happy for your new girlfriend! Although it's a pity that you fell in love with a Hexer, I must say that you have very good taste! The two of you are a great pair!"

WHAT?! Since when was Gloriana his girlfriend?!

"Uh, how did you know that?!"

"Your girlfriend has not been discreet about your new relationship. It's all she talks about whenever she shows up in public. You must have made her very happy when you met her at Centerpoint!"

This news astounded Ves so much that he felt like puking blood. Was this what Gloriana had been up to when he fled her company?!

He had to admit that it was a very devious move on her part. By crowing about her intimate relationship with Ves was a form of staking her claim on him in the public sphere.

If Gloriana was as determined to pursue Ves as she seemed, then she had definitely flaunted her supposed relationship with Ves all over Centerpoint by now!

Ves could hardly find another woman to date if it already became known that he was Gloriana's boyfriend! With this move, she ruthlessly cut off one of the possibilities that he could resort to in order to escape her clutches!

In his mind, he still thought he was merely exploring a relationship with Gloriana. They only shared one abortive first date and a rather tame virtual date so far. They only knew each other for a single month. That was hardly sufficient to call himself her boyfriend and vice versa!

Obviously, Gloriana thought differently. As far as she was concerned, they were already inseparable!

"So the reason why you want to end my membership to the Clifford Society is to avoid any possible conflicts of interests?" He asked after he recovered from the shock. "Is it also the real reason why you are ending my apprenticeship to you? So that it wouldn't look bad on you that one of your apprentices is dating a Hexer?"

Ves wouldn't be the only person to make himself look bad if he pursued a relationship with a Hexer while he remained apprenticed to a Master of the Coalition.

Master Olson herself would suffer a loss as well! The damage to her reputation for allowing one of her Apprentices to grow closer to the enemy reflected quite badly on her if it came out!

"Don't misunderstand. The previous reasons also apply." Master Olson nodded. "But yes, it is for your own good. It is too much of a controversy if a mech designer who maintained close ties to the Coalition is simultaneously growing closer to the Hegemony. You can't have it both ways. Between an insignificant apprenticeship to a Master that hasn't been much help and an intimate relationship to a very wonderful mech designer who is highly compatible to you, it is clear which one you should value more. Your future prospects are more important than your past ties!"

Although Ves knew that Master Mech Designers could be deceived, this was ridiculous! Master Olson truly believed that he and Gloriana had become a solid item! What had his blasted 'girlfriend' done to make her story so convincing?!

"I would not say that we are as committed as you think." Ves carefully replied, trying to tone down her misconception. "We barely met each other and we might break up after a while."

She shook her head. "You don't have to downplay your relationship. The matchmaking agency that has put you together thinks very highly of your pairing. Their conclusions are so optimistic that they are even advertising it as one of their success stories!"

Ves would have definitely spurted out a gout of blood if he had been able to! Callisto Professional Relations based their findings from completely inaccurate data!

Yet despite his protests, the damage had already been done. Even if he disavowed Gloriana, Master Olson probably wouldn't believe his word! Not if it totally went against the predictions of a famed matchmaking service associated with the MTA!

He hung his head. "I guess this is it, then?"

"As I've said, it is for your own good. Don't see it as a setback. You're free now. You can establish closer ties with the Hexadric Hegemony without embarrassing either of us. While I'm not happy that you chose to side with the Hegemony over the Coalition, your happiness is more important."

"Will the Coalition be okay with that?"

"Your allegiance is of no concern to the Coalition." Master Olson said factually. "Even if you are a Master, the fortunes of our state will not be affected."

That was true, to an extent. Master Olson and the Coalition believed that Ves was such a small figure that it didn't matter if he ran to the other side.

They might think differently if they knew about his secrets, but Ves obviously wouldn't volunteer that information.

"I see. I'm glad the Coalition won't hold it against me if I ever do so."

Though a part of him thought it was a huge blow to cut ties with Master Olson and the Friday Coalition, another part of him agreed with her prior reasoning.

Even without the impetus of Gloriana's actions, Ves already considered his apprenticeship to Master Olson to be redundant. Although they could still engage in mutually-beneficial transactions going forward, neither of them really required each other's help.

Still, just because he didn't mind cutting his existing ties didn't mean he was pining to become an ally of the Hegemony! He didn't even make up his mind whether he wanted to develop a serious relationship with Gloriana!

The Hegemony may be a powerful second-rate state, but it was run entirely by people who thought women were better than men! A significant part of the population, which happened to include his supposed girlfriend, also worshipped the number six for arbitrary reasons!

If he had a choice, he would rather continue to associate with the Friday Coalition. Most of the coalition partners such as the Carnegie Group and the Vermeer Group were quite decent and rational.

As Ves progressed his career, it was inevitable for him to dabble with second-class mechs at some point. He would rather do business with rational Fridaymen than crazy Hexers!

Since Master Olson had made her choice, she moved on to formalizing his separation. She pulled out a data pad and loaded it with numerous official virtual documents that legally confirmed his separations.

After skimming them over and signing all of the documents, Master Olson took the data pad back. "I'll file these documents to the relevant authorities. The LIT, the Society, the Coalition and the MTA will all confirm your separation in due time. Once that happens, you are free to pursue Miss Wodin without any worry of conflicting loyalties."

"Won't it still reflect badly on you for a former apprentice of yours to enter into a relationship with a Hexer?" Ves curiously asked.

"It will, but it is only a minor annoyance. It is ordinary for Masters to apprentice mech designers who turned out differently from their expectations."

In other words, Master Olson could diminish the damage to her prestige by regarding Ves as a black sheep.

While that didn't sound very flattering to Ves, it wasn't as if he could do anything about it. His reputation was already mixed, so becoming known for having strong differences of opinions with an esteemed Master who showed him kindness hardly bothered him at this point.

"It is a pity." She sighed. "I had plans for you before you left for Centerpoint. Oleg missed your company as well. Out of all of my Apprentices, he was the happiest when he heard you've advanced to Journeyman. He already made

some plans to collaborate with you on a mech design to see if the two of you would make good partners."

"Oleg.."

"He already left to attend the Rimward Games a few months ago. Be sure to cheer for him when he competes. Although it's a longshot, I really do hope he finishes in the top thousand."

So many young mech designers from all over the galactic rim competed in the junior division of the Rimward Games that it was wildly unrealistic to hope for better! Forget about the top 1000, Ves did not think highly of Oleg's chances of finishing in the top ten-thousand!

"I will be sure to wish him success. I still consider him a friend, if only distantly."

Master Olson smiled at Ves. "When you keep progressing, I hope you will keep in mind what you should value more. Mech designers who get too caught up in tribalism will never be able to realize the true purpose of our profession. We do not design mechs to advance the interests of a single state. We do so to advance the interests of the entire human race. Never forget this truth, Ves."

"I will remember your words, ma'am."

Her words carried a tone of finality in them. They had truly done it. They formally separated from each other. From now on, Ves was no longer Master Carmin Olson's nominal disciple!

Chapter 1293 Deflated Confidence

Ves stepped out of Master Olson's estate with a profound sense of loss.

Though he did not value his apprenticeship to Master Olson all that much recently, to formally put an end to it made him realize what else he relied upon.

He keenly felt the absence of the psychological comfort his status as her apprentice provided. As long as he had a powerful Master Mech Designer hovering over his head, he felt he could get away with a lot.

Now that he lost her direct care, Ves did not feel so easily anymore. A former apprentice may possess some lingering informal ties to Master Olson, but formally he was no longer a part of her organization.

Many mech designers who completed their apprenticeships under a Master often moved on to join their company or become a part of their business network.

Not so for Ves. In order to reinforce the impression that Ves no longer had anything to do with the Friday Coalition, Master Olson did not bring up any of those options.

She didn't want to put up any barriers for Ves to pursue a relationship with Gloriana, after all!

Though his supposed girlfriend's antics had pushed Master Olson into cutting ties, Ves did not begrudge Gloriana all too much.

"While it's a shame to turn away from the Friday Coalition, it really is better if I'm no longer under Master Olson's thumb."

He possessed too many secrets. He was always afraid that Master Olson might find out the truth. Though he thought highly of her integrity, what if she was different from what he imagined?

Hardly any mech designer would be able to contain their greed if they knew of the full import of the System!

The more time he spent under Master Olson's supervision, the harder it would be for him to keep his secrets from her hawkish perception.

Even today, Ves never felt as if he completely managed to fool Master Olson.

In hindsight, although he believed that his attempts at misdirection had caught on, it was rather disturbing to him how easily Master Olson bought his nonsense. He expected better from a Master. They were so spiritually powerful that even if they didn't share his unique perception, they should still be able to observe more than a normal human!

A suspicion crept up in his mind. Could it be that Master Olson knew that Ves was being dishonest, but accepted his excuses in order to avoid putting him on the spot?

"That might very well be a possibility."

She might have already leaned towards cutting ties before the meeting even started. Why would she be curious about his circumstances if that was the case?

In the end, Master Olson made a decision that served both of their interests. She would no longer be at risk of getting involved in a potential controversy. Meanwhile, Ves wouldn't have to deal with any conflicts of interests if he grew closer to Gloriana.

"Not that I'm too sure about her yet. She's a real handful." He muttered.

While it was a shame to lose the psychological comfort his apprenticeship provided, he also felt a huge burden had been lifted off his shoulders. Now that Master Olson no longer scrutinized him so closely, he would have a much better time hiding his secrets.

A Master Mech Designer's attention was a double-edged sword! Getting rid of it may leave him on his own again, but he always preferred that from the start.

Perhaps he would still value Master Olson's protective umbrella when he was an Apprentice, but now that he became a Journeyman, he became a lot more assured about himself.

"It's not as if I'm truly alone."

Ves still possessed numerous connections. The Larkinsons, Professor Ventag, Flashlight, the Tovars, the Ylvaine Protectorate and Calabast all backed him up in different ways.

As long as he kept expanding his network, he could replace the protective function of his apprenticeship to Master Olson with ties to other powerful figures.

"Powerful figures like... Gloriana."

He could not deny that Gloriana's status far surpassed him. Even though she did not equal the likes of Master Olson, she was still a prominent scion from the Hexadric Hegemony. She carried a lot of weight by virtue of her lineage. Becoming a promising Journeyman on top of that significantly amplified her clout.

He still felt uncomfortable, though. His stature and prestige was a far cry from hers, and that made him feel profoundly inadequate. How could he face her as a proud man when her very existence diminished his pride?

He was a man! He should stand up to his woman! Whatever nonsense the Hexers believed, Ves could not accept being the lesser partner in any potential relationship!

A fire lit up inside his mind. He needed to work hard to stay ahead of Gloriana! If he was stronger than her, she wouldn't be able to dictate his life to this extent! Not only would he be able to call the shots, but he could also start protecting himself instead of depending on others!

"Ves! Mr. Larkinson!" Zona Fonseca ran up to him. "I just heard that you're parting with Master Olson! Is that true?!"

Ves nodded. "It's true."

"Why!? Did you do anything wrong or something?!"

"You'll find out soon enough, I guess. Make no mistake, we both agreed on ending my apprenticeship. It no longer served a purpose and it is the best course of action if we take the future into account. Our separation is nothing more than closing a chapter in our lives."

Though Zona still looked saddened, she accepted the explanation. "So you won't hang out with us after all? We hardly ever knew you. There are tons more apprentices who would like to meet with you and learn some tips."

Ves sagely smiled. "Master Olson's guidance is sufficient. If she hasn't taught you more, it's because you are better off learning those lessons on your own."

The two began to walk towards his transit shuttle.

"So... I guess this is it. Will this be the last time you visit the Leemar System?" Zona asked.

"Very likely. I won't be as welcome to Leemar as before."

Perhaps the entire Friday Coalition would become rather awkward for him in the future.

That reminded him that he should draw down his ongoing security contracts with SASS in the near future. Sanyal-Ablin Security Services was an enterprise of the Konsu Clan, which happened to be the second-strongest partner of the Coalition!

"Then.. can we still stay in contact through our comms?"

"I don't think that is entirely wise." He responded. "I really don't have that much to offer to you anyway. You should forge relationships with your fellow Fridaymen instead. They'll be much more valuable to you once you step out of Master Olson's shadow."

She didn't look that confident. "I'm just a nominal disciple though. While my chances of advancing to Journeyman is greater than the average Leemar graduate, it is still an uncertain prospect."

Ves chuckled and stretched his hand. Zona widened her eyes as Ves rubbed the top of her head.

He did not do that without a reason. Aside from trying to reassure her, he also wanted to confirm whether he sensed the presence of spirituality within her mind.

Fortunately, she did. Although her spiritual energy was weak and faint, its presence at least signified that she possessed the potential to become a Journeyman. She just needed to apply herself.

"Let me tell you that you will surely be able to become a Journeyman. It's difficult, but it's doable. However, your chances are a lot better if you gain some confidence and stop doubting yourself. Earning Master Olson's regard should be enough proof of your ability!"

"B-But I'm still nothing compared to you!"

"Don't compare yourself to me. Master Olson and I both know that I'm not a typical mech designer. That was one of the reasons why we put an end to my apprenticeship. Rather than comparing yourself to outstanding mech designers for no good reason, I suggest you look inward and set achievable goals for yourself."

They finally arrived at the shuttle parked near the estate. Zona still looked thoughtful, and to her credit she seemed to take his advice seriously.

"I'll think about what you said. I think you're right, though. I should be more confident in myself!"

Ves smiled. "That's the spirit."

The two shook hands before Ves entered the shuttle. As the vehicle lifted off in the air, Ves looked out the window and stared melancholy at the campus stretching out below.

He truly felt a little sad for saying that he might not be able to visit Leemar any longer.

Though he could still decide to visit the public cities and settlement of Leemar II, Ves decided against it. Who knew how far the news of his relationship with Gloriana had spread.

The Fridaymen would probably not be so petty as to make trouble to him over it. After all, Master Olson already told him that he was a nobody in their perspective.

Still, to spare himself of any potential incidents, Ves decided he should get out of Coalition space as soon as possible!

"Thanks for that, Gloriana." He scoffed.

He really needed to confront his 'girlfriend' for her unilateral announcement of their 'relationship'. Preferably, he wanted to teach her a lesson, but he doubted Clixie or her bodyguards would allow him to do so without consequence.

A few fantasies of how he would teach her a lesson flitted through his mind, some more.. unspeakable.. Than others. Yet Ves quickly dispensed with those unrealistic scenarios.

Rather than him teaching Gloriana a lesson, the reverse would probably happen!

"In the end, it all comes down to strength!" He softly cried in frustration.

Ves thought he did quite well for himself in the past few years. His rise had been rapid and brisk and reaching Journeyman at such an early age had already made his life much easier.

Yet now that he came in touch with an existence like Gloriana, his confidence suddenly deflated. How could he ever reverse their current power dynamic?

By advancing faster than her. Ves could think of nothing but the System that could help him the most in achieving this goal. As competent and driven as Gloriana appeared to be, she was still an orthodox mech designer! Whatever assistance she received would never come close to matching the prowess of the System!

"Hehe. I won't be your doormat forever!" Ves grinned.

He began to consider his future plans. Since he exited the Bright Republic, he might as well take the opportunity to travel around the star sector. He never really did explore it entirely. Ves felt he could definitely benefit from broadening his perspective and see how other, more distant states fared.

"A Journeyman is supposed to travel a lot, after all."

The only snag in the plan was that he had already sent Melkor and the Avatars of Myth back to Cloudy Curtain.

Although he could call them up and have them turn around, Ves did not feel the need to do so.

"I can easily contract a security company or a mercenary corps to guarantee my safety."

Ves did not plan on traveling anywhere dangerous for his impromptu space tour, so he could make do with a standard arrangement. He just had to make sure that whoever he contracted didn't have any ties to the Friday Coalition.

"I'll have to exit Coalition space first then." He muttered.

During his travels, he also planned to study up on both bestial mechs and smart metal technology. Once he gained enough proficiency in both fields, he then planned to design a mech that incorporated both.

"If it's good enough, I can even add the design to the LMC's mech catalog!"

Ves recalled that while the Komodo Star Sector mostly made use of humanoid mechs, there were a couple of states where bestial mechs were prevalent.

"They're worth paying a visit."

It was only now that he truly felt he embodied a proper Journeyman Mech Designer.

Chapter 1294 Setting Boundaries

When the shuttle arrived at the underground hangar, Ves returned to the Barracuda. Upon entry, Gavin expressed surprise at his swift arrival.

"It's only been a moment. I thought you would have stayed with Master Olson longer."

Ves smiled ruefully. "The news will go out soon, but I guess you better learn it now. As of today, I am no longer Master Olson's apprentice. I've 'graduated' from her care. I'm no longer a member of the Clifford Society either. I basically have no formal ties to the Friday Coalition anymore."

That stunned his assistant. "Why? I thought you mech designers loved to maintain relations with each other!"

"Let me explain, Benny."

As Ves gave instructions for Captain Silvestra to lift off into orbit, he described the reasons that led to this outcome. His lack of closeness to Master Olson and Gloriana's shenanigans both compelled him to cut ties.

At the end of it, Gavin still looked caught off guard. "This changes things. One of the reasons why you stood out was because you were one of the few mech

designers who were apprenticed to a Master. How many mech designers can boast of the same? While your association to a great Master will always remain, it won't be as prominent anymore. Over time, it will merely be a footnote in your record."

"It's fine. Although I'm rather peeved at Gloriana, it truly was for the best for me to distance myself from Master Olson. We are two completely different mech designers."

Ves would just feel suffocated if Master Olson compelled him to work on her behalf. Although many mech designers looked forward to the opportunity to earn the recognition of a Master Mech Designer, he happened to be an exception.

From now on, Ves did not owe anything to Master Olson, but neither would he be able to obtain any further benefits from her either. That suited both of them fine.

The only reason Ves felt a little cross was that he lamented the end of any ongoing relations with the rest of the Friday Coalition. Ves still had plans to engage with the powerful state in the future.

At the very least, the disruption to the LMC would be serious as Ves could no longer trust in SASS with the security of his company's assets!

"We will have to end our contracts with SASS." Ves stated to Gavin. "I don't know how far the news of my 'relationship' with Gloriana has spread, but we should move all of their security forces out of the Mech Nursery and find another security company to plug in the gap."

Ves did not mention the Avatars of Myth taking over the vacancy, as they were still wholly inadequate to fulfill such heavy responsibilities.

"I'll coordinate with Calsie and the other folks back home." Gavin nodded.

"We'll have to pay a price, though. I don't have the contracts on hand but they

definitely contain clauses that will force us to pay the full costs of security services over the entire terms of the contracts."

"It's fine. The price we pay for this waste is less than the price we pay for letting a potential enemy have deep access to my assets."

The changes would definitely lead to a lot of upheaval regardless. Ves did not envy the managers and executives back home trying to keep the LMC together as the trusted and dependable security force of SASS moved out and an entirely new security force took their place.

Nonetheless, Ves merely had to issue the orders and delegate this headache-inducing issue to his subordinates.

With Gavin running off to pass on the new instructions to headquarters, Ves entered the bridge and walked up to Captain Silvestra.

"You've returned sooner than we expected." She remarked. "The Barracuda hasn't even undergone any servicing yet. I suggest we wait until that's done before we leave."

Ves shook his head. "I'm afraid we can't do that. You'll hear about this later, but for now all you need to know is that I'm no longer Master Olson apprentice and that my relationship with the Friday Coalition will soon go sour. I don't think it is wise to let their engineers crawl all over my ship."

"Oh." The captain rapidly took in the implications. "If the Friday Coalition won't be friendly territory for long, then it is indeed prudent for us to leave. What are your orders, sir?"

"I'm hoping to take a tour through the star sector before I return home to the Bright Republic. Please set course to the Kamon Republic. It's fairly close, right?"

"It will take us less time to reach the Kamon Republic than Centerpoint." The captain confirmed. "While Kamon is rather small, it enjoys decent security since the third-rate state borders the Friday Coalition."

With such a huge neighbor right next door, the Kamon Republic enjoyed a lot of business ties to various Coalition influences. While arriving at Kamon would not completely bring Ves out of the Coalition's sphere of influence, at least he wouldn't be intruding in their direct territories anymore. He would just be strolling through their front yard instead.

Once there, Ves would have probably figured out his next destinations. He needed to do some careful research to see which states had something interesting for him to see.

They didn't necessarily have to offer lots of bestial mechs or smart metal mechs. Ves wanted to make one lengthy trip in order to familiarize himself with the overall state of the Komodo Star Sector and experience some of its diversity.

The captain and the navigator charted a speedy course that would bring them to the Kamon Republic in a couple of weeks.

The Barracuda ascended into the air, leaving the archipelago occupied by the expansive grounds of the Leemar Institute of Technology behind. The giant juggernaut that graced the campus became but a pinprick in the projection of the view outside as the ship rapidly gained altitude.

"Farewell, Leemar." Ves whispered and turned off the projection.

He retired to his stateroom, upon which a curious Lucky emerged from his catnap.

"Meow?"

"A lot has happened today." Ves replied, and quickly summarized what happened.

Not surprisingly, Lucky did not react as strongly as Gavin or the others. He merely gave a single feline look at Ves before returning to his slumber.

"Meowww."

"Yeah. It doesn't really change your circumstances, does it? I'll manage somehow. I just have to readjust some of my future plans."

"Meow meow."

"We won't be going home yet. We'll be going on a sightseeing tour through the entire star sector."

"Meow!"

"Of course I'll bring you along! Don't expect I'll open my wallet as much, though. I need to cut back on my spending."

Before he turned to other matters, Ves decided that he really needed to talk to his supposed 'girlfriend'. Though he hesitated for a few seconds, he eventually went through with his call attempt.

A projection came to life just a few seconds later. Gloriana appeared as beautiful as ever. This time, she wore a tight lab coat that emphasized her slender waist and her feminine curves.

"Ves! I'm so glad you called me!" She gleefully greeted him. "Did you miss me, perhaps?!"

"Ahem, this is not a social call, Gloriana." Ves sternly replied.

Although it was tempting for him to get caught up in her happy bubble, he really needed to show some spine today.

"Then.. what's the matter, Ves?"

"What have you been spreading back on Centerpoint?! I just found out that you've been publicly claiming to be my girlfriend!"

Gloriana blinked. "So?"

"We didn't even go on a single proper date yet!"

"So?"

"I don't think our relationship has developed to this point! You've been way too premature in declaring yourself as my girlfriend! Do you know how much trouble you could have caused for me in the Friday Coalition? Master Olson just washed her hands from me and I'm no longer friends with any organizations in the Coalition!"

"Good."

"Good?" Ves grew frustrated. "Is that all you can say? Don't you have any remorse?!"

"It had to happen. While I didn't intend to spoil your arrangements with your Master or the Friday Coalitions, I don't want you to associate with any Fridaymen any further. When I broke the news to my parents, they expressed a lot of disapproval once they looked into your background. Solving this conflict is the first step towards tying the knot! Hihih!"

Ves slapped Gloriana's projection. Although his hand flew right through the insubstantial form, the act deeply shocked the giggling woman.

"Gloriana! Be serious for once! I'm really pissed at you for pulling off this stunt!"

It finally dawned upon Gloriana that she may have taken a step too far. Not that she truly felt remorseful.

Tears began to gather in her big, lustrous eyes. "I-I-I was just doing what was best for the both of us! I didn't want any other woman to hold any designs for

you! I don't like you hanging out in the Friday Coalition either! What if some floozy on Leemar starts draping herself all over you? I don't want you to be led astray!"

Her possessiveness both disturbed and flattered Ves. If she wasn't so attractive and compatible to him, he would have shown more repulsion.

"Look, let's not move so quickly, okay?" He spoke in a calmer tone. While he was still angry, he somehow didn't wish to show his ugly side towards Gloriana for some reason. "Let's take this one step at a time. For now, I don't want you to blab any further about our relationship, alright?"

She sniffed and nodded. "I promise. I won't tell anyone except my parents and friends."

Though she looked so pitiful that Ves ached to embrace her, he knew better. She must be grinning in her mind. After all, the deed had already been done. If she had been as prolific in flaunting her status as his girlfriend as he suspected, then the news would have spread through most of the Komodo Star Sector by the end of the week.

Although not everyone would be interested in the gossip, all the notable organizations such as the MTA and various intelligence agencies would surely take note!

Though Ves could insist Gloriana to retract her statements, he had a feeling that wouldn't work. He knew better than to issue a request that would never be fulfilled.

"Look, Gloriana. You're really into me. I get that. But let's not put the cart before the horse. Before we make any permanent commitments, we should find out if we are truly comfortable with each other. Mech designers like us live long lives. We have all the time in the galaxy to see if we can get along."

"But Callisto Professional Relations already analyzed our pairing. We're eighty-seven percent compatible! That's extremely high!"

That prediction again! Everyone took it way too seriously! Ves wanted to wring the necks of the AIs and relationship experts that came up with that blasted figure! A calculation derived from dubious input was just as flawed!

Even so, the discrepancy shouldn't be all that much. Otherwise, Ves wouldn't be so interested in Gloriana. The potential of combining his design philosophy with hers was an incredibly tempting prospect!

So much so that even his design seed urged him to grow closer to her!

Though it was a pity that she only worked on custom mechs, his intuition hinted to him that they would definitely be groundbreaking if he combined them with his own specialization.

Perhaps the custom mechs that emerged from their collaboration might even be able to make the Avatars of Myth take on a more literal meaning!

This possibility alone enticed him to continue exploring this admittedly problematic bond.

Just like Gloriana, he was willing to pursue any opportunities to advance his design philosophy. Perhaps it was his recklessness acting up again, but what was the harm of dealing with a little bit of craziness?

Chapter 1295 Accelerated Growth Options

After setting the record straight with Gloriana, he ended the call before she could entangle him in another virtual date.

"Consider this your punishment." Ves quickly said.

Though Gloriana cutely pouted at him, Ves had enough of dealing with her for a day.

He let out a deep breath as her projection winked out. He turned around and glanced at Lucky, who had been observing the entire conversation.

"I did well, right?"

"Meow."

"I put my foot down."

"Meow."

"Yeah, it will take more than a single rebuke for me to take charge."

During the conversation, Ves had been keenly aware that if he pushed Gloriana harder, she might push back or do something worse. He could only give her a restrained warning because anything else was unenforceable.

The only way to change this unfavorable dynamic was to become more powerful than her. While there were multiple ways to do so, the most straightforward option available to him was to advance to Senior first.

Ves scratched his chin. "Gloriana seems to be a very capable and driven mech designer. Her design philosophy may be difficult to develop because she's chasing after the impossible concept of perfection, but once she makes a breakthrough, it's pretty significant."

To be frank, her passion and drive drew a lot of admiration from him. She was one of the most motivated mech designers he had met so far. Although no high-ranking mech designer was truly lazy, there were only a few who were willing to do everything to accomplish their ambition.

Gloriana had at least that in common with the Skull Architect. Now that he thought about it, should he place himself in their category as well?

It was a disturbing thought.

"Am I being crazy for trying to improve faster just because I don't want a girl to be in charge?" He asked.

"Meow!"

"Heh. Figures you'd see it that way. Humanity may have developed into a thriving galactic civilization, but deep down we aren't too far away from the cavemen who were predominantly ruled by their instincts."

Ves had plans. He wanted to pursue sustained growth, both for his company and for himself. What was the point of pursuing reckless growth only to pay a greater price at a later point?

From everything he learned and all the advice he received from older mech designers, he knew that he should first and foremost prioritize his ability to innovate and to solve problems by himself.

Centuries of mech-focused innovation from countless mech designers resulted in a huge body of readily-available knowledge.

It took a lot of effort to obtain the more advanced and specialized pieces of knowledge, but at least it was available.

In essence, it was easier to obtain other people's knowhow than to discover it by himself. Who wanted to reinvent a specific wheel that had been invented a hundred times before?

Logically, it was better to learn how to build an existing wheel from others than develop it yourself. Yet what many mech designers forgot was that reinventing a wheel that already existed was not completely pointless.

"Learning how to innovate and discover unknown phenomena is vital to advancing to Senior and especially to Master. If a mech designer is only used to studying existing research findings, how well can they fare when it's their turn to enter the lab?"

When Ves met with Gloriana, he saw that she wore a lab coat and some protective gear. This signified that she was definitely performing lab work of some kind.

"She's quite diligent!"

Surpassing her would be quite a challenge. It wasn't enough for Ves to adopt a measured pace of growth. He needed to be more proactive and put more effort into accelerating his progression.

"It will be a disaster if she advanced to Senior faster than me!" He realized with fright. "I'll never be able to keep her in check if she's a Senior while I'm still a Journeyman!"

A number of horror scenarios whirled through his mind. Perhaps her patience would run out. She might decide to swoop in, take Ves away from the Bright Republic and forcibly drag him back to the Hexadric Hegemony without an opportunity to say goodbye to the people he left behind!

"Damnit, I really have to hurry!"

In general, the most talented Seniors still required at least a couple of decades to advance. Ves had a very long road ahead of him regardless of the measures he took to get to his destination faster.

When he thought over his approach, he made a very important point of distinction. "If my progression from Journeyman to Senior is a long and windy path, there are two ways to hurry up. I can either take shortcuts, or I can run faster."

He had to be careful not to take too many shortcuts. Ideally, he wouldn't take any at all. This was because walking the entire path ensured he would have the healthiest foundation to work towards reaching Master.

Instead, the best way to advance quickly while still preserving his ability to innovate and to research the unknown was to sprint over stretches that weren't as important or vital.

One example of this was studying fairly generic Skills and Sub-Skills. Previously, he made a very deliberate choice to begin the process of upgrading his Mechanics and Metallurgy main Skills to Senior-level.

"Studying is one of the more time-consuming activities of a mech designer." He muttered.

Every mech designer needed to meet a certain proficiency in the fundamental sciences related to mech design. Yet the higher a mech designer climbed, the more advanced knowledge they needed to learn.

It would take at least a couple of decades of dedicated study for an average Journeyman to reach Senior-level in a handful of sciences!

"It's necessary, but time-consuming!"

In these instances, Ves faced an easy choice. Rather than spend years behind his desk to read through an entire library of academic literature, it was much better for him to pay a hefty bag of DP and fulfill an Upgrade Mission instead!

Yet even if he upgraded all of his fundamental Skills to Senior-level, that did not mean he was equivalent to a Senior Mech Designer. It merely meant he fulfilled one of the prerequisites.

By far the most important factor was the development of someone's design philosophy! From Apprentice-level onwards, it was up to the mech designers themselves to develop their own design philosophies. Barring direct disciples, nobody could resort to outside help to accelerate their growth.

Ves was very much aware of this, and tried to come up ways to help him reach Senior faster without compromising his future opportunities.

"I see several ways to accelerate my growth."

He began to list out his options.

First, aside from upgrading his fundamental Skills and Sub-Skills, he could also try and find a way to upgrade his mental attributes.

"My Intelligence not only helps me in my mech design, it also improves my learning and memorization abilities. Improving it even further will be hard."

The System listed his mental attributes with a special focus towards mech design. At least that was how he interpreted. The addition of other Attributes such as Strength, Dexterity and so on made him suspect that the System might also be able to accommodate mech pilots as well.

"Too bad I'm not a mech pilot." He shrugged.

He had already surpassed the human limit with regards to Intelligence, Creativity and Concentration, so swallowing any further Attribute Candies served no purpose other than to waste his DP.

Yet that didn't mean he ran out of options to upgrade his mental attributes further. Gloriana already resorted to a lot of genetic modification to improve her learning ability.

Even Ves himself already benefited from various genetic treatments, which proved that he could still resort to solutions outside the ones offered by the System.

He still remembered he possessed an invitation card to the powerful Angel's Wing Foundation. He should really get around to using the card in order to access its rumored marketplace and auctions for biological goods and services.

"I always get caught up in other activities that it's always fallen off my mind."

Perhaps it would be a good opportunity to finally make use of the invitation card this time.

Still, since his three most important mental attributes were already past the human limit, it would be a hundred if not a thousand times harder to upgrade them. Ves needed to do a lot of research and find a trustworthy geneticist or organization to perform the desired treatments.

"I suppose approaching the Rim Guardians is the best option."

However, to do so, he first needed to prove his worth by transforming that Garlener William Urbesh into an expert candidate. If he failed to do so, he would probably be able to earn the MTA fraternity's favor in another way, but that would take way too much time!

"With Gloriana breathing down my neck, I can't afford to wait for another assignment." He muttered. "I have to kick William Urbesh into shape!"

Though he previously wanted to drag his feet in this assignment in order to avoid unwelcome attention, he changed his mind. Surpassing Gloriana was more important!

The second method he thought of to accelerate his advancement was to collaborate with other mech designers.

"It can't be any random collaboration, though. I need to find mech designers whose design philosophies synergize with my own."

If he combined his design philosophy with an unrelated one from another mech designer, then the resulting mech would merely incorporate both without any interaction. While they wouldn't conflict, neither would they reinforce each other either.

Only when his design philosophy reacted favorably in response to a different variable would Ves be able to study and decipher the interaction.

The most obvious candidate to help him accomplish this was Gloriana, but this would not help him get ahead of her at all. He needed to find other mech designers!

"There are many mech designers. I just have to find them and approach them to suggest mutually-beneficial collaborations."

For now, Ves had only recently advanced to Journeyman. He still lacked the reputation and prestige to get others to take him seriously. He would have to return to this option a few years later when he had a couple of more published designs under his belt.

The third option available for him would be to find exotic materials or other phenomena that might be related to his specialty.

"It is by far the most expensive option."

Wealthier mech designers possessed a greater advantage in this area than others. Even if a mech designer wasn't particularly talented, if his powerful family or connections could help him obtain related exotics, they would inevitably progress faster due to all of the research they performed on interesting materials!

"This is one of the biggest reasons why the second-rate states and the MTA have a lot more Seniors and Masters." He grumbled. "They can partially spend their way up with relative ease."

Ves did not have access to that much capital.

Yet Gloriana's situation was better. Not only was she a Hexer, but she was also a member of the Wodin Dynasty, which ought to be a very wealthy side power in the Hegemony.

"Damn, she possesses a huge advantage over me in this area!"

He needed to narrow the disparity as much as possible!

"There are two options available to me. Either I can expand the LMC in order to boost my capital, or I can take matters in my own hands and search for those exotics myself."

He decided to pursue both at the same time. The LMC would definitely grow as it sold more mechs based on his designs, but this growth had limits. The amount of money he would earn would always fall short compared to how much he wanted to spend on valuable exotics.

"It doesn't help that the vendors always seek to rip off mech designers whenever possible." He muttered.

Rather than pay a hundred or a thousand times the actual worth of an exotic, why not seek them out himself? Prospectors and treasure hunters trawled the entire galaxy for interesting exotics to sell. If Ves could cut out the middlemen and do business with them directly, he could obtain a lot more samples without spending more money!

In fact, Ves had already laid the groundwork of this option by forging ties with the Swordmaidens in the frontier. Further ahead, he also intended to raise another force that could search for valuable materials directly on his behalf.

It was easier to do so in the frontier. In civilized space, most planets and star systems already fell under the control of a state. Many valuables had already been discovered, but even if something new popped up, they were bound to fall in the hands of a powerful influence.

Ves sighed. "All in all, there are a lot of options, but none of them are easy."

Perhaps taking advantage of the System might help him out in some areas, but he still needed to do the rest on his own!

Chapter 1296 Working Vacation

After listing out and contemplating all of his options, Ves came up with a short-term list of objectives.

"The more objectives I complete, the closer I get towards overtaking Gloriana!"

For the duration of his tour through the Komodo Star Sector, he wanted to fulfill both Upgrade Missions from the System. The sooner he upgraded his main Skills, the sooner he could apply his gains in his subsequent mech designs, thereby achieving a significant jump in performance!

"Increasing the overall performance of my designs will also help me progress in other ways. Better mechs will enable me to earn more money, which I can spend on acquiring more exotics."

Everything was interconnected to a degree.

Improving his design abilities improved his ability to earn money.

Improving his earnings increased his access to beneficial goods and services, which subsequently improved his ability to design mechs.

Aside from upgrading his Mechanics and Metallurgy Skills to Senior-level, Ves also wanted to pursue two other objectives.

"First, I want to befriend other Journeymen with interesting design philosophies. I might not be able to collaborate with them now, but who knows if an opportunity presents itself in the future."

Traveling to parts of the Komodo Star Sector that was out of the way allowed him to get in touch with foreign mech designers who he might never come across.

Spending time in Centerpoint allowed him to do the same, but Ves was very leery about returning to the MTA-controlled system.

"Gloriana might still be there!"

Traveling through the hinterlands of the Komodo Star Sector was a much safer prospect in his eyes.

Naturally, he also wouldn't forget about coming into touch with the local variations of bestial mechs and smart metal mechs along the way.

Aside from those goals, Ves also wanted to browse the local exotic marketplaces. Plenty of discoveries made it to Centerpoint, but not all. Some materials which did not seem promising were mostly sold in the state they were discovered. The prices for them were much lower as well as the vendors didn't have the leverage to rip off their customers too much.

"Centerpoint is a very expensive place to do business, but in turn it attracts a lot of wealthy buyers. The same can't be said for poorer places."

As the Barracuda transitioned into FTL, thereby leaving the Leemar System, Ves began to spend his days on researching his potential destinations.

There were dozens of states in the Komodo Star Sector. Each of them offered something remarkable to Ves, but he could not afford to spend too much time away from the LMC. He only planned to properly visit a handful of them by following a looping route around the Hegemony side of the star sector.

In every standard two-dimensional map of the Komodo Star Sector, the frontier was pointed upwards. In the middle of the star sector, the Friday Coalition occupied the left side while the Hexadric Hegemony occupied the right side.

Considering his deteriorating relationship with the Coalition, Ves chose against passing through the states on the left side of the map.

While he did not feel comfortable at the thought of entering Hegemony space directly, it would be fine for him to pass through states that maintained friendly relations with the Hexers.

Based on the various criteria that Ves had set, he chose out six interesting destinations. Visiting each of them might yield some important gains for him that would help him stay ahead of Gloriana's growth.

"After departing from the Kamon Republic, I'll pay a visit to the Kinner Tribe, the Chuko Republic, the Sentinel Kingdom, the Hertog Dominion and the Tomaris Federation. By then, it's just a short trip back to the Bright Republic."

He still needed to work out his itinerary and determine what he would do in each specific state, but overall he was very satisfied with the diversity of his selection.

"Entering Kinner Tribe space will be very interesting." He grinned.

It was a relatively small state even compared to other third-rate states. It possessed a strong and distinctive culture and had gained a lot of fame for its distinctive mercenary corps.

"Kinner mercenary corps are different from other outfits."

The Kinner Tribe was a poor state and did not offer as many specialties compared to its neighboring states.

What it did have was a very strong martial culture and a very vigorous population. Many mercenary corps consisted of entire families or a very cohesive group of companions.

Every Kinner mech pilot could be relied upon to fulfill their contracts even beyond reasonable circumstances. Although the employer would have to pay a hefty sum to cover the damages on top of higher-than-average fees, a

Kinner mercenary corps could be counted upon to fight to the death to fulfill their mission!

This made them very attractive to people who were willing to pay extra to ensure near-complete loyalty and dedication from their hired help.

Naturally, the missions the Kinner tended to perform occasionally demanded high sacrifices, which eventually resulted in the deaths of many Kinner mercenaries.

"It's basically trading blood for money." Ves commented.

The Kinner Tribe encouraged high birth rates in order to supply enough bodies to sustain this radical practice. They also made a lot more use of artificial wombs to replenish battle losses.

Many young Kinner, either born artificially or turned into orphans after the deaths of their parents, grew up in military training camps or other state institutions. Many of them, especially the mech pilots, grew up into warriors who embodied the Kinner warrior culture.

Each of them subsequently joined an existing Kinner mercenary corps or started a new one under the lead of an experienced and more worldly leader.

Compared to a regular mercenary corps, a Kinner mercenary corps was much more dependable. While they were not always well-equipped, the qualities of their mech pilots more than made up for that.

In some cases, clients could even outright buy a Kinner mercenary corps. Their loyalty would never be in question as long as the client did not pit them against the Kinner Tribe.

In essence, it allowed wealthy people or organizations to instantly acquire a ready-made, extremely loyal fighting force!

The bought Kinners only demanded a couple of conditions in exchange for their permanent loyalty.

The Kinners should have the freedom to start their own families and have children who grew up under their distinctive style of parenting. Kinners highly prized procreation, so anyone who attempted to limit that would quickly find themselves crossing one of the few lines the Kinners prized!

These children born after the acquisition of the mercenary corps did not belong to the client. They were free Kinners who had the freedom to choose whether to work for the clients like their parents or leave for the Kinner Tribe for other prospects.

In this way, the Kinners incentivized their buyers to take good care of them. Clients who did so continued to enjoy their services over several generations.

As for clients who neglected or abused their Kinners, they would quickly run out of bodies after a generation had passed.

This along with some other reasonable conditions basically ensured the continued existence of the Kinner Tribe despite its weak geographical foundation.

Ves contemplating turning to this solution as a way to quickly augment the Avatars of Myth. Raising his own mech force keenly made him realize that it took a lot of time and effort to do so properly.

"Buying a Kinner mercenary corps is a convenient shortcut." He muttered. "The only problem is that the price is likely too high for me to afford a decent one."

After centuries of operating in this fashion, the Kinner Tribe developed a very sophisticated market for their mercenaries. Each Kinner mercenary corps volunteered accurate data about their fighting prowess to the Tribe and received a certified valuation of their actual worth.

Therefore, even if a client paid a lot of money, they at least received the assurance that they got what they paid for. In fact, the Mercenary Association established a very strong presence in the state as well to add an extra layer of certainty!

With his current wealth, he could easily buy the poorer and smaller Kinner mercenary corps, but they did not bring too much to the table. He might as well wait for the Avatars of Myth to grow up instead.

The better Kinner outfits were worth billions of credits, and Ves did not easily wish to spend such a huge sum at the start of his tour. He still needed to reserve his money for potential calamities, interesting exotics, access to notable mech designers and so on.

"It's better for my bank accounts if I hire a good mercenary corps first. I can always decide to buy them at the end of my tour if I like them and accumulate the necessary money somehow."

Ves intended this trip to be a working vacation instead of just a sightseeing tour. Not only did he want to experience different cultures, he also wanted to be productive, though he didn't wish to spend too much time in every state.

"I'll just keep a lookout on any jobs and commissions I can fulfill in a short amount of time."

Once he determined his plan, he summoned Gavin and Captain Silvestra to his office and laid out his choices.

Gavin looked intrigued. "I haven't heard much about those places aside from the obvious. They are certainly distinctive in their own ways. It's a great choice if you want to experience something completely different than the Bright Republic. It's just..."

"Not all of those states are safe for travelers." Captain Silvestra grimly noted. "The Kinner Tribe is small and surrounded by aggressive neighbors. The

Chuko Republic is close to Komodo's border with Vicious Mountain. The Sentinel Kingdom is a very orderly state, but they have to since they are in close proximity to the chaotic Nyxian Gap. The Hertog Dominion is highly controlled, but only by virtue of their tyrannical rulers. There is widespread discontent beneath the surface. As for the Tomaris Federation, it is an institutionally weak state because it is situated very closely to the border with the frontier."

Ves already read up on the problems the captain mentioned. No state was perfect, let alone one in the Komodo Star Sector. He had already discarded numerous alternative stops due to the unacceptable risks they posed to his safety and freedom.

Still, he did not intend to change his current selection. He shook his head. "I've already contemplated safer destinations, but they tend to be the more boring ones. Hardly any conflict occurs there, which means that their mech culture is not as prominent or accessible to me. I want to experience mech cultures which have withstood numerous tests. There is little point in visiting a soft state akin to the Reinald Republic."

For these reasons, Ves rejected any suggestions to adjust his selection. The five states he listed would be his primary destinations for his trip.

"How long do you want this journey to last?" Gavin asked. "It's all well and good to go on vacation, but the LMC is still waiting for you to return."

Ves shrugged. "Let's say a year. Will that be possible, Captain Silvestra?"

The female captain mentally calculated the estimated travel time. "I'll have to work with navigation to chart the safest and most optimal route, but you'll have to spend a minimum of half a year in FTL travel by my estimate."

That meant that Ves would spend six months in FTL transit and six months on a foreign planet, space station or other locations.

"That sounds fine."

Even in transit, he could still make good use of his time by studying or designing a mech.

Ves clapped. "Alright! Since there are no acute problems about my selection, let's make our preparations. Benny, please research each of the states and see if there are any notable sights see and mech designers to visit. Captain, please work on the route and present it for my approval!"

Chapter 1297 Diverse Mech Cultures

On a standard two-dimensional sector map, heading upwards from Centerpoint eventually led to the Bright Republic after passing through a number of states.

Heading straight downwards immediately led to the Kamon Republic.

The Kamon Republic bordered both the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony. Early on, the Friday Coalition managed to influence the Kamon Republic and turned it into a loosely-connected vassal state to the Friday Coalition.

This basically meant that while Kamon was still as poor and underdeveloped as a normal third-rate state, it enjoyed the implicit protection of a very big brother.

In particular, the Kamon Republic developed extensive official and unofficial ties to the Vermeer Group, whose territories directly bordered the state.

Thinking about the Vermeer Group which the Barracuda was passing by put Ves into a turbulent mood.

"This is the Coalition partner from which Master Olson hails from." He stated as he zoomed in on the plot projected in front of him. "The Titanium Garden isn't that far away from here either."

Sadly, he would never get to set foot on the famed artificial satellite.

"There are more places I can visit besides the Titanium Garden." Ves shook his head. "The galaxy is vast and endlessly diverse. Even if limited to human space, there are countless curiosities to discover."

One of the few words of advice that Master Olson gave him was that Journeymen always ought to move beyond their own familiar confines.

Ves deeply understood this truth. If he remained stuck in the Bright Republic for the rest of his life, he would have never seen the diverse ways mechs were being put to use.

Mechs acquired different meanings under different circumstances.

To a Brighter, a mech was a defensive tool, a means to defend the Republic against outside aggression.

To a Vesian, a mech was a tool for earning glory and greater status. In this hypercompetitive feudal society, every commoner could elevate themselves to nobility, and every noble could gain a higher status upon performing well in battle.

To a Reinaldan, a mech was a product. Rather than put them into battle and consume a fortune's worth of assets and manpower, why not focus on exploiting their economic value instead?

To a child of the frontier, a mech was the ultimate tool of survival. Possessing or piloting a mech meant you possessed a measure of strength. Only those who piloted mechs had the grounds to take their lives in their own hands!

To an Ylvainan, a mech was a vessel to express their faith. Mechs not only had to defend their state, they also had to advance their beliefs. If they left their security to machines that contradicted their faith, they could no longer call themselves Ylvainans.

"In short, mechs are more than just war machines. They are also totems that encompass each state and each culture's core values."

As a mech designer, Ves designed a mech from the perspective of a Brighter. He unconsciously approached his work with Brighter values, customs and ideals.

Was there anything wrong with this? Not necessarily. Yet if Ves ever wanted to reach a wider audience, he needed to be more cognizant of how his mechs would be perceived by mech buyers from foreign states.

For example, Ves already personally experienced how sober, functional-looking mechs didn't always cut it in a weird state like the Ylvaine Protectorate. Their propensity to dress up their mechs in religious symbolism and iconography meant that he would have to adjust his mechs according to local tastes in order to achieve enduring success.

Although his elevation as their Bright Martyr partially helped his company bypass this hurdle, Ves still intended to go through with his setting up a means to adjust his future products to local customs in the Protectorate and elsewhere if needed.

Ves smirked. "It's great that the Bright Republic's mech culture is a bit boring and plain. That already saves me a lot of work."

An Ylvainan mech designer would never be able to sell their mechs outside of the Protectorate. Their mechs all looked like walking altars or statues of the Ylvainan Faith, which meant that no non-believer would ever wish to put them into use!

For this reason, if an Ylvainan mech designer ever wanted to export their products elsewhere, they needed to gut the entire outer appearance of their designs!

"That's going to present a really difficult dilemma to these bunch of complacent bums." He scoffed.

The trouble the Ylvainans faced was that they strongly believed that their mechs ought to express their faith in a visually distinctive manner.

Would they be willing to make an exception to this long-standing tradition in order to engage in foreign trade?

"The Curin Dynasty will be in favor, but the Poxco Dynasty will do everything they can to stop this shift."

The greater point was that while the Ylvainans would have to be more aware of the limitations of their design style, so did Ves.

Did this mean he would have to give up the Brighter identity of his mechs? Not necessarily. He just had to be aware of how well his mech would fare in all the markets the LMC chose to prioritize.

"Mech designers exist to develop solutions. Not every solution is optimal in different states. It depends on the circumstances."

Right now, Ves only had a shallow understanding of how mechs were being used in other states. Only by visiting them in person and immersing himself in the local mech community would he be able to develop a deep and authentic understanding of foreign markets.

Ves sighed. "Sadly, there's no way to visit every single state in the Komodo Star Sector in a reasonable amount of time."

It would take years or decades to complete such a journey. Some states were similar to the Ylvaine Protectorate in that they heavily restricted foreign entry. Other states were wracked with conflict and instability and featured very poor security.

Besides, there was little added value in visiting each inconsequential state. While a market was a market, not every state featured an eccentric mech culture. The LMC would not have to make any adjustments to sell its mechs to those markets.

Of course, Ves still missed out on plenty of unique mech cultures which imposed strict demands on any mechs put up for sale. The LMC would just have to accept the reality that its products wouldn't appeal in those weird states that couldn't be accommodated without excessive adjustments.

As the Barracuda crossed into the territory of the Kamon Republic, everyone spent a lot of time fleshing out Ves' travel itinerary.

Gavin and Captain Silvestra made various bookings and reservations and also approached various local mech designers if they were open to professional visits.

Something peculiar occurred that caused Gavin to report to Ves.

"Is there a problem finding mech designers willing to host me or accept a visit, Benny?"

Right now, Ves had barely passed the threshold into Journeyman. Combined with his very short design record, which foreign Journeyman wanted to entertain such an inexperienced mech designer?

Surprisingly, Gavin shook his head. "It's not that, boss. When we started contacting the staff of every mech designer on your list, we did indeed meet with a lot of rejection. Sometimes the receptionists or whatever outright hung up without saying goodbye. Yet when we mentioned your name to some of the people we talked to, they seemed to recognize it and act very friendly all of a sudden."

"Oh?" Ves folded his arms. "These mech designers all live in states that are all quite distant from the Bright Republic. They shouldn't have heard of me,

and I doubt the LMC has a strong presence in their markets. What is it about my identity that causes them to take note?"

"Well.. I don't know how you'll take it, but.. it's not you, but Gloriana. Somehow, they're aware that you're her boyfriend. Even if she hasn't made a lot of achievements yet, she is still a scion of the Wodin Dynasty. Many mech designers are very afraid of crossing their ire, so they've been remarkably accommodating when we requested the possibility of accepting a visit from you in the future."

This.. Ves became stumped. How far had the news spread throughout the star sector? At the very least, the states aligned to the Hegemony should have paid close attention to the rumors spread by his supposed 'girlfriend'!

"Goddammit!"

"Look on the bright side, Ves! At least we've been able to secure the commitment of numerous mech designers that you're interested in! The amount of mech designers who accepted has surpassed our estimate! We even had to stop contacting any further mech designers because your itinerary is already filled!"

While that indeed came as welcome news, Ves doubted the sincerity of the mech designers who acquiesced on account of the Wodin Dynasty. It felt as if they were only going through the motions because Ves put a gun on their heads.

How could any sincere exchange take place if none of the mech designers respected him for his own merits? They probably intended to treat him like a nobody who lucked out with a fantastic girlfriend.

Yet.. was that so bad? Maybe Gavin was right. Maybe getting at least some access was better than having a door slam into his face. Even if he took

advantage of the power of the Wodin Dynasty, it was the least his girlfriend could offer as compensation for the damages he suffered at her hands!

"Make sure they are sincere or well-behaved enough to treat me seriously, Benny." He instructed. "I don't mind the method we've used to secure those commitments, but they have to be sincere enough for me to accomplish some actual gains."

Gavin nodded. "I've already taken that into account. We prioritized securing the commitments of those who have possible business and personal ties to the Hegemony. They're at risk of suffering a lot of losses if they piss off the wrong person."

That was not what Ves meant, he wanted to complain. Yet he let Gavin's remark be. Being feared was better than being dismissed in this case.

In an ideal reality, Ves preferred to be recognized by his own qualities. Yet without any established reputation in their circles, it was better for him to borrow someone else's. The Wodin Family was the equivalent of a comital house of a feudal state.

To put it simply, Gloriana's status was similar to that of Lord Javier in the Vesia Kingdom.

Such a level of power and authority was more than sufficient to make any mech designer in a third-rate state wary.

Ves did not mind pretending to be an agent of the Wodin Family if that was what it took to command the attention of a foreign mech designer.

Regardless of how willing they wanted to entertain him, Ves was confident he would be able to charm them into a more consensual exchange! He wasn't called the Devil Tongue for nothing!

"By the way, boss, we'll be arriving at the Kamon Republic's port system soon."

"The Zin Alpha System, I'm aware." Ves nodded.

"Do you want to stop by and hang out there for a couple of days? Captain Silvestra wants to load up some supplies and top off the ship's spent energy and fuel reserves before we embark on the lengthy tour."

Ves figured that since he left the Friday Coalition proper, it should be okay for him to enter the Zin Alpha System. Despite Kamon's role as a buffer state to the Friday Coalition, it was still an independent entity.

"Fine." He dismissively waved his hand. "There are curiosities in every port system. I might as well see what Zin Alpha has to offer to its visitors."

The Kamon Republic was a rather soft state due to enjoying the protection of its huge neighbor, so Ves did not hold any interest in its mech culture. Instead, he specifically wanted to see how a third-rate state developed when it came under the continuous influence of a prosperous second-rate state.

Did Kamoners live better than Brighters or Vesians? Or were they actually worse off?

Chapter 1298 Beast Mech Minor

During the journey to the Zin Alpha System, Ves spent a decent amount of time on his studies. He caught up on the miscellaneous literature he collected recently and also bought a few textbooks on bestial mechs and smart metal mechs.

Though he already possessed passing familiarity in both subjects, Ves took the time to refresh what he knew and began with the basics.

Bestial mechs encompassed an entire subgenre of mechs. Mostly prominent in landbound mech warfare, mechs shaped like centaurs, spiders, wolves and other animals offered distinct advantages compared to humanoid mechs.

First and foremost was that mechs that relied on four limbs to move possessed superior stability and mobility. Humanoid mechs relied on two powerful legs to move, but it took quite a lot of effort in keeping them upright and in balance.

"Bestial mechs are just better at moving in a fast-paced, chaotic battlefield."

They offered superior mobility in the same weight class in almost every case. Not only that, but four limbs offered a lot of redundancy in case a battle became a drawn-out affair.

A humanoid mech could be rendered combat ineffective with the least amount of effort by dealing a pinpoint strike on one of their legs.

To do the same on a bestial mech required taking out at least two limbs. Even if their limbs were lighter than that of a humanoid mech's leg, destroying just one of them still left a typical bestial mech with a decent amount of mobility, hardly affecting its speed at all.

The only complication was that mech designers initially struggled to come up with the best configurations for bestial mechs. Eventually, some customs had emerged.

First, a bestial melee mech such as a tiger mech fought primarily using their limbs. A lot of mechanical power would be devoted to the limbs in order to facilitate a powerful leap that could quickly and efficiently allow a tiger mech to put a lot of momentum behind its attacks.

Even at a standstill, a bestial mech was incredibly formidable because its powerful limbs enabled the mech pilot to make rapid changes in direction with rapid dashes and leaps.

The only downside to such an active form of battle was that bestial melee mechs needed a lot of individual room to maneuver in order to bring out their best strength.

Such mechs were quite unsuited to fighting in formation or in tight ranks. Mobility formed the key to their offense as they relied heavily on momentum to deal strong, crushing attacks.

This did not mean that bestial mechs were limited to claw or leaping attacks. Plenty of mech designers managed to mount gun barrels to a classic bestial mech, mostly onto its flanks or inside its head.

Gun barrels mounted to the flanks usually weren't fully turreted because such mechanisms took way too much space. Therefore, most bestial ranged mechs mounted them in a limited swivel arrangement that allowed for only limited angle adjustments.

Simply speaking, such mechs could only fire forwards, leaving them heavily vulnerable to sudden flank or rear attacks.

Bestial mechs didn't fare too well in defense either. While such mechs could present a smaller and tighter profile against ranged attacks, they did not have the option to make use of shields. Although their frontal armor would always be better armored, it was still an awkward arrangement unless a force deployed a turtle mech or something that looked similarly ridiculous.

Yet the biggest shortcoming of bestial mechs was their inherent inflexibility. Although specialized humanoid mechs could be rather inflexible as well, at the very least their forms allowed for some ingenuity when necessary.

Not so for bestial mechs.

They were stuck with the weapon loadout baked into their designs. A melee tiger mech could not exchange its claws for a laser rifle when assailed by aerial mechs! At the very least, a humanoid swordsman mech or knight mech could resort to such a solution if they had access to spare laser rifles!

In short, bestial mechs were basically more specialized mechs that fulfilled a particular role better than most humanoid mechs.

Yet they were also not very popular in the Komodo Star Sector, which usually did not look down on specialized mechs.

There was a very basic reason for that.

"Humanoid mechs are easy to learn but hard to master. Bestial mechs are hard to learn and harder to master."

It took additional talent, training or effort to make a mech pilot proficient in piloting such mechs. Because they adopted a form divergent from the human body, mech pilots needed to become accustomed to taking advantage of the bestial form.

"That isn't always easy."

The standard of training in the Komodo Star Sector was fairly low compared to more prosperous star sectors. Many mech academies lacked the time or resources to properly train their mech cadets in the operation of a bestial mech.

The case may be different in more prosperous states and star sectors, but close to the frontier the humanoid supremacy movement reigned supreme by virtue of its ease and convenience.

"Naturally, not every state is blindly sticking to humanoid mechs. Bestial mechs are still interesting to some." He muttered.

Ves wanted to visit those states in person in order to find out first hand why specific organizations decided to make widespread use of bestial mechs.

Naturally, by that he specifically focused on the use of classic bestial mechs such as tiger mechs, wolf mechs and the like.

Mechs that combined the advantages of humanoid arms with a bestial lower body such as centaur mechs or most spider-legged mechs didn't count. They

operated much more like humanoid mechs, but incorporated some of the mobility advantages of bestial mechs.

Ves determined an important rule. "A true classical bestial mechs sacrifices humanoid flexibility for raw bestial power."

This was a philosophical principle that many hardcore bestial mech designers abided by. They rejected the ubiquity of humanoid mechs and turned to the animal kingdom to achieve greater mechanical performance.

"Quite a lot of bestial mech designers are purists." He discovered. "They chose one animal shape and specialize in it for the rest of their careers."

There were wolf mech fanatics, tiger mech fanatics, turtle mech fanatics, hawk mech fanatics, space squid mech fanatics and so on. The variety was endless and they showed up in every possible environment.

The mechs these specialized mech designers came up with did indeed offer an impressive level of performance. It was just that most mech pilots unused to bestial mechs needed extensive training before they could become proficient in their use.

"Everything has a price. Bestial mechs offer greater performance, but unless they're piloted by mech pilots familiar with these types of mechs, they're no better than the humanoid mechs they are trying to replace."

To someone like Ves who mostly planned to stick with humanoid mechs, the mech industry advised that he should only dabble in only a single type of bestial mech at most.

"It's like studying a minor." He realized. "It's meant to broaden my perspective and understand what bestial mech designers have to deal with on a daily basis."

Since the System wanted him to design at least one bestial mech, Ves needed to make a selection. Which classical bestial mech shape should he adopt as his customary beast shape?

He quickly turned his head to Lucky, who comfortably lounged on his bed at the moment.

"Meow?"

"Hehe." He grinned. "Out of every possible animal, I'm most familiar with cats!"

"Meow.."

Tiger mechs were basically cat mechs in a sense. They were predominantly melee mechs that greatly emphasized ambushes and leap attacks. They tended to be fairly heavier than most other mech types as they relied greatly on a combination of mass and mobility to power their devastating collisions.

They possessed pronounced downsides as well. Aside from the common disadvantages it shared with all bestial mechs, they also imposed very high demands on their mechanical integrity.

"All of those leaping and collision attacks put an incredible amount of strain on the frame of the mech. The shock it has to endure is of a much greater magnitude than that of a typical swordsman mech or knight mech. The biggest challenge of a tiger mech is not defeating its opponent, its doing so while preventing its frame from falling apart!"

Both the mech and mech pilot needed to step up in this regard. The mech pilot needed to become familiar with the common techniques developed specifically for tiger mechs and needed to avoid pushing the mech's parameters past their limits.

The most frequent mistake an inexperienced mech pilot could make was to make a bad collision or fall, where their tiger might snap off a limb or incur massive impact damage to parts that couldn't absorb that much shock.

As for the tiger mech itself, it needed to be designed with mechanical integrity as its highest priority!

No bestial mech designer neglected their study into mechanics, battle mechatronics and other related fields in order to insure the most robust mechanical structure possible for their designs!

"Maybe this is why I'm tasked with designing a bestial mech. They not only place a higher emphasis on mechanics, but this field is also applied in very different ways."

The System very deliberately pointed him to bestial mechs as a way to improve. Although he did not always like the System's decisions, he had to admit that its lessons had always been poignant and useful.

Still, that left him to shift his mind towards the other field he was studying, which was smart metal technology.

Ves shook his head at what he learned. "Really now. Smart metal may be used here and there, but they are not very common among third-class mechs. Just like polarizing systems, they're mostly not worth it below a certain tech level and budget."

Smart metal technology really started kicking into gear with second-class mechs. The reason why should be clear.

"Smart metal is really just a huge bunch of tiny nanomachines or equivalent."

A bunch of tiny machines tied together on a microscopic level to form a single flexible, morphable piece of armor plating would never be able to match the sheer durability of solid armor plating.

Ves already witnessed this in action during his latest Mastery experience where Axelar witnessed a mech arena match that featured one such mechs. Even the Terrans hadn't been able to make a smart metal mech that overpowered a typical first-class multipurpose mech.

Smart metal technology offered a lot of versatility, no one doubted that. Yet it cost a lot and delivered less performance.

"What is the price of flexibility?"

The ability to change a mech's shape or to repair gaps in the armor on the fly sounded useful. More advanced smart metal mechs could even replace broken limbs or core components by siphoning smart metal away from their less crucial parts.

Yet it became clear to Ves that smart metal tech had yet to reach maturity. It was an expensive, wasteful solution desperately looking for a problem in order to justify its existence.

Aside from abnormal, niche circumstances, smart metal mechs mostly amounted to novelties. Enemies unused to facing smart metal mechs might be startled, but once they became more ubiquitous they would learn to overpower them with brute force.

"That's the biggest downside to smart metal technology." He concluded. "It's very adaptable against light damage, but can't shield a mech from annihilation from a single, powerful burst."

Ves thought back on his intention to design a smart metal bestial mech. The problem was that if he decided to develop a tiger mech, it put such a huge strain on shock absorption and structural resilience that implementing smart metal technology did not make sense!

"Bestial mechs are by nature inflexible mech types that focus on raw performance. Smart metal tech adds flexibility at the cost of a significant

amount of performance. Combining the two will negate each other's strengths while amplifying their weaknesses!"

Was it really a good idea for him to design a smart metal tiger mech? All signs so far pointed to no!

Chapter 1299 Adverse Reactions

Just before the Barracuda arrived at Zin Alpha, Ves briefly checked up on everyone else, starting with Melkor.

"Have you taken William Urbesh's measure? How good of a mech pilot is he, really?" Ves asked.

The projection of Melkor shook his head. "William is.. a difficult case. Let me begin with his piloting skill. He's well-trained. That's a given. Though many of his habits would see him killed when placed on an actual battlefield, that can be remedied through rote training. It's his attitude that's the real issue."

"He's a coward, right?"

"Essentially, yes." Melkor sighed. "William received excellent training and his body and mind have both been augmented to a good degree. By all rights, he should be an elite. During simulation battles against AI opponents, he fared quite decently. It's when he faces human opponents that he begins to show his frail mentality."

Ves blinked. "He's scared of fighting mechs piloted by humans? In a simulation?"

"Yes."

It sounded ridiculous! The threat of death in simulations was nonexistent! Barring a short circuit or some freak accident in which the hundreds of safeguards applied to simulator pods all went haywire, a mech pilot ought to be able to fight to their heart's content!

"What's the problem with William, exactly?"

"We put our mind docs on his case, and boy, he's a handful. The short version is that William is fundamentally afraid of fighting. This guy is a natural coward. For someone like him to luck out in becoming a potentate is one of the biggest travesties of the galaxy! While his genetic aptitude is merely graded at C, whenever he faces a human opponent his effective genetic aptitude instantly plunges into the E-range!"

Melkor explained a bit more and pulled out several examples where William Urbesh failed lots of easy scenarios that even a mech cadet could have overcome with ease! The psychological condition that afflicted him was so ingrained into his being that it was almost impossible to treat!

"The human mind is very resilient but also very fragile." Melkor noted. "Our mind docs found traces of modest cranial operations in William's mind. This is very risky considering that he's a mech pilot. Even then, it hadn't worked. In every fight and flight situation, William always chooses to flee, even if he is pumped up with rage stimulants!"

The actual medical explanation was too complicated for Melkor to recite, so he merely transmitted the relevant reports to Ves over the comm channel.

"So what does that leave us with William?"

"We can keep training him all we want, but without a deep and fundamental shift in disposition, William will always fail in stepping up when it really matters. The only way we might be able to achieve this shift is by rejigging his entire brain structure with dubious and extremely risky interventions. Not even the MTA has gone that far, because such procedures will likely permanently impair his ability to pilot a mech or at worst lead to his death! The MTA needs patient consent in order to even suggest such radical treatments, but there's no way a coward like William will ever approve!"

In the end, the main point was that there wasn't an easy fix to William's ingrained fear. Not unless Ves was willing to cross some lines.

After clarifying the situation a bit, Ves did not see any immediate solutions either.

"For now, just hold his hands and polish his skills and combat habits. Let the other Larkinsons have a try with him as well. They might click with him in a way all his other instructors never accomplished." Ves instructed.

"That sounds good, but these suggestions aren't likely to work."

"I know, Melkor, but let's not rock the boat too much. We have three years to achieve some progress. I'll take a look at his condition myself when I return from my tour through the star sector. Perhaps a year of instruction under a Larkinson will set him straight."

After discussing a few other matters related to the Avatars of Myth, Ves closed the call. He called up Calsie next to receive a status update on the LMC.

"The company is doing well enough that it doesn't require your intervention for quite some time." She stated. "There has been one notable incident that needs to be mentioned. Do you remember your old friend Carlos Shaw? He knocked at our doors a week ago."

Ves immediately became more attentive. "He's back?"

"He wanted to talk to you in person before rejoining the LMC. He was disappointed when you weren't here."

"What did you do, then?"

"I sent him on to Ketis, who did her best to make him welcome at the LMC. It's just..." Calsie trailed off.

"What's the matter?"

"News broke out at what happened when you were at Centerpoint. The gossip rags all announced that you manage to ensnare the affections of a wealthy and powerful Hexer Journeyman. According to their reporting, it's yet another instance of the Devil Tongue working his magic onto an innocent victim!"

Ves smiled ruefully at that. Gloriana, innocent? Hardly!

"Has that changed the LMC's circumstances in any way?"

"Not too much, at least for now. While the news hasn't affected the LMC's market perception too drastically since it is simply another story to add to your celebrity life here at home, it has led to some subtler shifts."

"Such as?"

"Well, the Bright Republic as a whole has always leaned towards the Friday Coalition. For the LMC to abruptly enter the camp of the Hexadric Hegemony as your relationships implies has ruffled some people's feathers. Fortunately, the second-rate states are very distant to us normally, so our sales haven't dipped."

Ves knew that not every state would react so nonchalantly. "The LMC's position in foreign states which are more strongly aligned to the Friday Coalition will probably sour."

"We know." Calsie replied. "We had to make a lot of adjustments to our expansion strategy. Scaling back our plans for expansion into Coalition-aligned states and turning towards Hegemony-aligned states for the very first time has led to a considerable amount of flurry in our offices."

"Sorry for that."

"We'll manage. It's your company, after all. We still believe in your leadership." Calsie ruefully smiled.

"So how did Carlos and Ketis react?"

Calsie looked sheepish. "Well... not that good, to be honest. When the news broke out, Carlos abruptly tendered his resignation and left the LMC while Ketis locked herself in your lab."

He closed his eyes. Indeed, not everyone took a liking to the new development. Still, he was highly disappointed by Carlos' reaction. How could he ever make it as a mech designer if he let his jealousy?

"I already prepared some contingency plans in case Carlos decided to part with the LMC. Look up the relevant files in the LMC's database and make sure to implement the one that best fits the circumstances."

"I'll do that, boss."

As for Ketis...

"Does Ketis want to leave as well?" He asked.

"No. She was disappointed for a bit, but then she became more determined than ever. She's been working herself ragged these last few days, all in an attempt to catch up to you!" Calsie sighed. "Ves, far be it from me to tell you how to run your life, but you really ought to clear up your feelings with regards to Ketis. She deserves a clear answer."

A discomforting mood settled over Ves as he thought about Ketis. "I don't know the answer myself, to be honest. While I care for her, I always considered her to be my first protege. As a mentor of sorts to her, it's not proper for me to think any further. This is a line I won't allow myself to cross."

Neither of them appeared happy with this answer.

"I think in her heart, the poor girl knows you think that way about her. I'm glad to see that instead of lashing out, she instead resolved to improve herself so that she can be more than your student. I'm only afraid that it might be too late and that all of her efforts will go to naught."

"I think Ketis is strong enough to get over it. She's a tough girl." Ves replied, as if that would make the situation better. "She deserves to be with someone who appreciates all of her facets. It would be best if she encounters a mech designer whose design philosophy synergizes well with her own. Can you.. can you set her on the right path? I'm worried she isn't thinking healthy thoughts right now. I don't want her to follow in the same footsteps as Carlos."

"Really, Ves. You ought to be the one to console the poor girl. Instead, you've decided to go off on a random tour through the Hegemony side of the star sector."

Admittedly, Calsie had a point. Even now, Ves felt extremely reluctant to call Ketis directly. His intuition hinted that he would not enjoy the conversation that would ensue.

"Can you, Calsie?"

"Fine. I'll help clean up your mess. You really ought to have been clearer to her in the first place, you know. Aside from her rough edges, she's a great girl and brings some much-needed levity."

"Thanks for that."

"Tell me seriously, Ves, are you really into the Wodin girl or is this just some kind of stunt that will blow over?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "We're attempting to make it work. She's a lot more eager than me, but we've barely met each other at this point. It's possible that she'll tire of me once we get to know each other better."

Fat chance. Ves knew better than to expect Gloriana to drop her interest in him. Not when she recognized a great opportunity to elevate her design philosophy to a higher level!

When Ves finally ended his call with Calsie, he let out a tired breath. He truly hoped that Ketis would not stall her progression due to this circumstance. He found it encouraging to hear that she instead drove herself even harder.

"Even if she's disappointed, as long as she becomes a Journeyman or higher, she at least fares well in her career."

If Gloriana became a greater part of his life, Ves did not know if Ketis would still work for him at the LMC. He wouldn't blame her if she wanted to leave like Carlos.

"Hopefully Gloriana and Ketis will find some way to get along." He whispered. "A trusted subordinate mech designer isn't easy to find."

Ves nurtured Ketis from an inadequate pirate designer into a rising Novice with a strong learning ability. He also shaped her principles and her approach to mech design to better align with his own. It would be a great pity if he lost her before he could earn a return on his investment.

"Yet even if she leaves, she's still my student. I should be happy for her success regardless if she works for me or not."

Even though he said that, why did he feel like a rotten bastard who just made an awful mistake? A strong feeling of guilt suffused his mood and he couldn't even figure out where it came from. Should he change his mind?

"...Nah."

Ves always considered himself to be a decisive person. He did not like to display any muddle-headed behavior.

For now, he remained committed to seeing if his relationship with Gloriana would work out. Changing his mind halfway for no good reason except to give in to his doubt would not accomplish anything meaningful. That was not how he managed to advance to Journeyman so quickly.

"Even if it turns out that I've made a mistake, I should at least see it through before that becomes clear." He resolved.

Ves shoved these thorny matters to the back of his mind. Instead of worrying about this or that, he would rather think of something more pleasant, such as his upcoming visit to the Zin Alpha System!

Chapter 1300 Out Of Touch

"Meow!"

"Yeah, I know Lucky. It's really busy here!"

Ves had barely stepped outside Zin Alpha III's spaceport and already found himself caught in the hustle and bustle of traffic. An ocean of commuters and tourists all headed for the jumbo-sized aircars that constantly went in and out with a full load of passengers.

He held on to Lucky with one hand while adjusting his shawl over his neck. The capital city happened to be situated in a temperate region that was entering into a winter period.

The jostling of people rushing to the exits did not help him in this regard.

"Hey, watch it! Didn't your mother tell you not to bump into strangers?!"

As a Journeyman and a galactic citizen, Ves had access to a special service that would see him deposited at a much calmer VIP terminal where he could ride a personal shuttle to any destination he wanted.

On a whim, he declined to do so. How could he study what life was like in the Kamon Republic if he did not immerse himself among the locals?

While there were some legitimate security concerns about mingling in with the crowd without any guard escort, Ves dismissed those worries.

"Public security is quite high here."

Guards and automated security were present everywhere. A lot of investments had been made to make the planet safe. This was because the Zin Alpha System frequently entertained visitors from the neighboring Friday Coalition. How could the Kamoners ever allow their esteemed guests to come to any harm?

As Ves looked this way and that, he spotted several accommodations for VIPs. A very stark divide existed between second-class and third-class citizens.

Those who spent lavishly according to local standards enjoyed much greater privileges. To Ves, it seemed that a significant part of Zin Alpha's economy ran on entertaining wealthy tourists.

"Even an average Coalition citizen can be treated like a king in Zin Alpha!"

Ves quickly realized that perhaps that was one of the main points of attraction. The lower classes of the Friday Coalition might not be a big deal in their home state, but once they moved out and descended upon a third-rate state, they could momentarily enjoy the illusion of being a person of means who everyone else wanted to fawn upon.

This became very obvious to him when he gazed his eyes upwards. A network of transparent tunnels hung above the main floors of the spaceport. Various guests confidently walked above the masses while being surrounded by attendants acting servilely in their presence.

"They are like gods floating high amidst the clouds."

As Ves boarded a crowded high-capacity airship, he looked out the porthole as the vehicle flew to the center of the capital city.

He spotted numerous floating palaces, office buildings, plazas and other fantastic structures. Suchs sights may be common in a second-rate state, but

not in a third-rate state. The influence of the Friday Coalition was quite pervasive at first glance.

Once the airship finally touched down at a transit center, Ves disembarked and entered the main avenue that led to numerous grand shopping centers.

Familiar brands plastered his eyes as he raked in the shops and establishments. Zin Alpha III seemed no different from Bentheim aside from the addition of floating structures above every citizen's head.

Different from Bentheim was the distinct lack of mechs on the streets.

Back there, the sight of Planetary Guard mechs was very common. Mech ownership was quite pervasive there, as even criminal gangs could obtain them without too much effort. Other people and organizations applied for permission to field their own mechs in response, and mostly got them if they were wealthy or important enough.

Not so on Zin Alpha. Although Ves detected a lot of robust security measures along with quite a few law enforcers in plain clothes, the city showed a very distinct lack of mechs available to respond quickly to possible crises.

The sight reminded him of his abortive shore leave on Harkensen I. The Reinaldan paradise planet wanted to offer its guests and tourists a scenery devoid of any notion of war, and what did that get them? War came to them anyway.

Ves sighed. "Zin Alpha is different. Unlike the Reinald Republic, the Kamon Republic is too close to the Friday Coalition. No troublemakers are sane enough to start anything under the Coalition's noses."

Ves flipped his shawl over his neck once again as he began to walk aimlessly through the streets. Fancy shopping streets and entertainment venues attracted many Kamoners and other visitors, yet Ves remained fully unmoved.

Instead of indulging himself in pointless shopping, he instead studied the people that frequented the stores. All of them seemed happy if constantly moving. Hardly anyone took a rest.

All of this seemed normal. Yet compared to the crowd in Bentheim, Ves observed a crucial difference.

"Most of them don't seem to be engaged in mechs at all."

Stores that sold complete mechs or toys and props based around mechs were in short supply. Their frequency was very low for a reason, as hardly any visitors entered these places.

Such a sight would never have taken place in Bentheim! A huge amount of Brighters and foreign visitors were enthused about mechs. Children wanted to buy action figures of the latest mech models. Adults bought merchandise of their favorite mech athletes. Mech insiders bought actual mechs.

Those who wanted absolutely no involvement with mechs consisted of the minority in Bentheim!

The same pattern existed almost everywhere he visited. Even the deprived from a piss-poor region like the frontier worshipped mechs to an almost religious degree!

Yet all of this open enthusiasm towards mechs appeared to be largely absent in some of the most premier shopping avenues in the capital city of Zin Alpha III.

"Is it just this city specifically or is it the same everywhere else?" He wondered.

After a bit more exploration where he strayed into the less frequented areas, he noticed that hardly anyone ever had mechs on their minds. The locals

didn't even discuss the latest mech games matches or crowd over a popular mech release!

The Kamoners essentially lived as if they were in a very different age!

It didn't take much thought for Ves to figure out the underlying reasons behind their lackadaisical attitude towards mechs.

"Hardly anyone here has seen conflict."

Kamon resembled Reinald in that both states never entered into a full-blown war for centuries. Their favorable geographic circumstances meant that war was unlikely to erupt in their state.

That has inevitably led to the development of other priorities over mechs.

"Still, at least the Reinald Republic is still engaged with mechs, if mostly for trade and piracy. The same can't be said for the Kamon Republic."

It was as if Kamon had decided that it was pointless to build up a robust military mech branch. The information he found through a quick search on the galactic net revealed that Kamon's mech military was woefully underfunded, undersized and highly neglected. It could never defend the state against an invasion against its neighboring third-rate states.

"Yet such invasions will never happen." Ves summed up the collective assumption of the Kamoners. "Who would dare affront a potency of the Friday Coalition?"

Mechs were very expensive to procure and to maintain. What was the point of wasting all of that money on numerous military mechs that never saw any action? Only so many mechs were needed to patrol the space lanes and ensure public order in the event of disaster.

The Kamon Republic gave up all pretense of being able to defend itself against outside threats. Instead, the state seemed content to trust the Coalition to cover its defensive needs.

For now, the deterrent seemed to work. Kamon truly hadn't seen war since it approached the Coalition.

It felt a bit unreal to him, though. As a Brighter, he found the attitude of the Kamoners to be too optimistic. What if the Coalition retreated one day? Defense should never be farmed out to another entity that would never have their best interests at heart.

"I thought the Reinald Republic was already pathetic, but it turns out that the Kamon Republic is even softer!"

Such a state would fall in a matter of weeks if it lost the protection of the Coalition!

Ves had rather mixed feelings about Zin Alpha III.

On one hand, the citizens here appeared to be more content and less concerned. In Bentheim, hardly anyone truly relaxed, because the Bentheim Liberation Movement might pop up at any time and any place in order to sow chaos.

On the other hand, the Age of Mechs was still a violent time. Conflict and war happened in every corner of the galaxy. If humans weren't fighting against humans, then they were likely fighting against aliens.

The Komodo Star Sector itself bordered the frontier where occasional news about berserk sandmen entering into human space spread rapidly in the region.

Yet to the Kamoners, the problems at the frontier border were someone else's concern. Their sheer disconnect to any of the conflicts raging elsewhere in the star sector made Ves feel profoundly helpless as a mech designer.

"There's hardly any demand for mechs in this state."

Ves hailed an aircar and traveled directly to the capital city's mech district. While Kamon featured its own mech industry, Ves found that its scale and activity was far behind when compared to the mech industry back home.

"There are a lot less native mech designers and mech companies here. Demand is too low to sustain more businesses."

The worst thing about it was that Kamon's open borders and permissive trade policies allowed foreign mech companies to dominate, thereby further depressing native mech designers.

A substantial amount of foreign mech designers operating in the Kamon Republic happened to consist of Fridaymen who hadn't been able to achieve success in Coalition space. Although not all of them managed to adjust to the lower technological standard, it wasn't all that hard to design mechs that were simpler than they were used to in their home state.

Although the Friday Coalition probably didn't pursue a deliberate strategy to neuter the Kamon Republic, their close ties inevitably resulted in this depressing outcome.

Ves shook his head in disappointment. "When times are good, everything is fine. Yet the moment chaos strikes, everyone here will regret their complacency."

Though he privately admitted that such a calamity likely wouldn't come to the Kamon Republic, should its leaders be betting on that outcome?

"If the leaders adhered to the Societal Vitality Theory, then they would have at least done something to remedy this situation." He grumbled.

While Ves did not like the Rubarthan theory, seeing the state of the Kamon Republic made him feel as if it actually had a good point. Conflict or at least the threat of one might kick these complacent Kamoners into shape and force them to invest more in their armed forces.

"How can poor, struggling mech designers like me do business in such a peaceful state? It's a travesty!" Ves shook his head.

"Meow!"

"Oh come on, Lucky. It's not that I'm wishing ill on the Kamoners. It's for their own good! If all of humanity was like the Kamoners, our race would have been extinct by now!"

After seeing first-hand how Kamon's native mech industry had been pushed to the fringes, Ves no longer held any interest in exploring Zin Alpha any further.

"Mech designers thrive off conflict, war and uncertainty." He whispered. "A peaceful state citizens live out their entire lives in peace for centuries is no place for me. Perhaps one day there will come a age where all of humanity no longer has to fear any threats. That age is unfathomably far away."

Right now, the Age of Mechs was at its height. A mech designer like Ves need not fear running out of customers anytime soon.

"The peace that reigns in this state should be the exception rather than rule. I hope my other destinations on my tour will be more exciting."