

Chapter 651 Lighting the Torch

Ves let Ketis stew for a time after he set her straight about her lack of drive and ambition. How could a mech designer ever achieve greater heights if their fires weren't lit?

A passionless mech designer was as useful as a bot and possessed the imagination of a rock. Ves encountered many of these zombie-like mech designers from the lower ranks of the profession. These men and women had become jaded to their careers and had given up their hopes. They barely made ends meet and worked dead-end jobs as mech repairers or mech appraisers.

A mech designer that exclusively dealt with other people's mech designs couldn't be called a mech designer anymore. The core tenet of their shared profession centered around designing mechs. Once they stopped designing mechs, they cut themselves off from any hopes of advancing.

"And that's fine. Not everyone is cut out to be a mech designer."

Too many people wanted to be mech pilots first and mech designers second. They couldn't help it was it was the Age of Mechs. Genes put a hard limit on the former profession, but the second one came with no such restrictions. Anyone with a degree in mech design or equivalent could call themselves a mech designer.

"There are way too many mech designers. If you count them all up, they are enough to meet humanity's market demand at least a million times over."

What did that mean? It meant if the total number of mech designers in the galaxy was a million times left, enough survivors would be left to meet the current market demand!

A lot of mech designers simply gave up on their primary careers and shifted over to become a cog in the vast machine that represented the mech industry. Plenty of functions required in-depth knowledge of mechs. Coupled with a decent education and a good technical background, they wouldn't be lacking for jobs.

"Still, whoever thought it was a good idea to open the floodgates? Schools are accepting way too many students who want to pursue a career in mech design."

Ves had already formulated some guesses why every school was so liberal about teaching mech design. "It's like playing the lottery. Most mech designers are garbage, but if you keep churning out enough of them, eventually you'll find a gem in the rough. The MTA is looking for something, and it hasn't found it yet after so much time."

The root to this policy lay with the Mech Trade Association. The MTA pushed hard to popularize mechs for reasons unknown to pretty much everyone. The Age of Mechs did not come about naturally. It was forced down the throats of humanity after they almost went extinct at the tail end of the Age of Conquest.

In short, the MTA really liked mechs, and they wanted to spread the love. They wanted to raise lot of mech designers quickly, so they initially subsidized mech design courses at many universities.

After four-hundred years, these subsidies should have long turned into dust.

Instead, the opposite happened. The MTA doubled down and increased their support for mech design classes. A standardized mech design degree quickly came about, which at its barebones required at least four years of study to achieve.

Even with an enormous supply glut due to the abundance of mech designers, the MTA still thought there wasn't enough mech designers!

"Is the secret cabal that's in charge of the MTA smoking stimulants all day?"

As a lowly Apprentice Mech Designer, Ves understood little of what went on at the higher levels. They could have been senile brains in jars making incomprehensible decisions in their galactic ivory tower, but they were impregnable in that position. Even if trillions of people complained about how easy it was to become a mech designer, the MTA had never budged even once in over four-hundred years.

Ves encountered the damage of such an outdated policy many times, most recently in Harkensen III where so many mech designers lacked opportunity and gave up their chance at advancement.

Some mech designers had been born to this profession. Ves counted every Master and Senior among them. Someone like Mayra also fell into this category because she managed to climb all the way up to Journeyman from a poor, frontier background.

Each of them overflowed with varying amounts of genius and passion. Though being naturally intelligent or talented in mech design helped out a lot, it was passion that formed the key. Every mech designer he knew who achieved greatness either loved to work with mechs or based their ambitions around them. Ves had never met a single high-ranking mech designer who hated their job.

"The Skull Architect is the most obvious example of this category of mech designer. Even if he faced many setbacks, he is still an indomitable mech designer who has made ends meet in the frontier."

Intelligence combined with motivation often led to dramatic results, for good or ill. No matter how many deaths the Skull Architect was responsible for, Ves still respected him for his achievements and for his unwavering devotion to his design philosophy.

Ves actually felt a lot of sympathy for the poor chap. Having worked on his Leiner Grey intensively for almost a week, Ves never truly realized what a titanic struggle each Senior had to go through. His inhuman drive nonetheless gave the ruined man a chance to pick himself up and return where he left off.

"Between the losers who have given up and the passionate mech designers without fear, there is a middle category as well."

The naive and the normal people fell under this category. These people hadn't been ground down to dust by the mech industry yet. Some eked out a respectable living as a marginally successful small-time mech designer, or became a peripheral member of a larger design team.

A lot of mech designers fell into this category, but Ves noticed that none of them ended up very far. "Their ambition and passion are restrained. Even if they harbor dreams, they are shackled by their own limitations. Most will eventually slide into the loser category, while the rare few are lucky to find a star to guide them to the passionate crowd."

Right now, Ketis fell under this category. She had actually been slowly sliding towards a darker future without being aware about it. What Ves had done was to pull open the veil and showed her the unvarnished reality of what would happen if she went in either direction. Ves hoped by making the case clear to her that she would pick the right direction to work towards.

"All I can do is give her a little nudge. True passion can only be ignited from within."

He already formed a game plan to guide her into seeking out a greater goal. Mayra must have figured that Ketis could start her soul-searching when she was separated from the Swordmaidens. By bringing her out of her comfort zone, she encountered a lot of new stimuli and a different way of working with

mechs. The contrast between the familiar and unfamiliar should lead to a lot of soul-searching in the girl.

"This is why relying solely on apprenticeships and mentorships is a faulty, outdated education model. If mech designers are wizards, locking them up in a single tower and inundating them with only their teacher's perspective will lead to a warped student who doesn't know how to survive once they are kicked out of the tower."

The task placed before Ves basically amounted to solving the issues that festered when Ketis studied mech design under a single person instead of attending a proper school. It had long been known that schools were the best environment to raise a proper, rounded mech designer. Even if Ves himself went to a rather crappy school for mech design, the many teachers at least brought him up with all the correct values, customs and principles.

"In the end, if you want to make it further in mech design, you have to work for it. The advantages of money and connections can only give you a head-start and elevate you up to a point. Not a single Journeyman Mech Designer got to their height by being lazy and entitled."

This was also why the mech industry wasn't dominated by mech designers who were born with silver spoons in their mouths. A quality like passion couldn't be bought. It needed to be developed from within.

"It will be difficult to get Ketis up to the right standard. From what I saw from her unfinished variant, she's too far behind in many aspects."

Still, he looked forward to this challenge. It allowed him to exercise his teaching abilities and gain some experience in that aspect.

He enjoyed the act of teaching. His rare tutoring sessions became a pleasure to him. The perspective of his students provided him with fresh and unconventional perspectives on existing theory.

Inwardly, he felt he himself studied too quickly. He absorbed way too much knowledge in a span of less than three years. Through the System and through abusing his transhuman Intelligence attribute, Ves bulldozed through almost every barrier without sweating for it. He felt somewhat guilty at the ease in which he gained most of his knowledge.

"Maybe that's why I am so enthusiastic about knocking on the Skull Architect's door. He treats his knowledge with the reverence they deserve. Not just anyone can come and grab a copy of his knowledge base."

Ves suddenly realized his motivation had some issues as well. Though he was definitely passionate about mech design, the rapid success he enjoyed so far had distorted his priorities.

"What is my dream? What is my goal? What is my aspiration?"

Just like how Ketis used her closeness with the Swordmaidens as a crutch, so did Ves use the various advantages such as the System as a substitute for a proper aspiration.

"So far, I have several goals. I want to grow powerful enough to help my father. I want to reach the pinnacle of mech design and design the best mech in the galaxy. I want to grow my company into a trans-galactic enterprise whose products are sold in every star sector."

Yet these reasons sounded rather hollow to Ves. Certainly, they were decent goals to strive for, but where was the fire? Where was the passion? Just saying that he wanted to help people out, that he wanted to become the best in the galaxy or that he wanted to be the richest human alive sounded like something a six-year old would say.

"It's just like with the river. I'm making too much light of the challenges in my way. I've grown a bit too conceited at my chances of achieving success."

That wasn't good. The moment he grew too arrogant, he would stop struggling for something greater. He previously used the analogy of swimming against the current or floating downstream a river. If he grew too complacent about his development, then he would certainly lose the drive to swim upstream.

"I've got set a real goal. One that is located at the mouth of the river. It has to be a destination that I want to reach at all costs. What do I truly want? What shall be my lifelong dream as a mech designer?"

Thinking about the motivations that drove the likes of the Skull Architect, Mayra and Ketis stimulated him in a way he had never felt before. Out of all of the goals he set throughout his journey, he realized he already formulated a dream he could work towards.

His Spirituality sang within his mind. It was as if his surroundings fell into darkness. Nothing else existed except for himself and his ultimate goal. This was not a selfish goal, nor a limited one. This was a goal set forth by himself but upon achieving it would comprehensively strengthen humanity as a whole.

Achieving this goal would earn him the recognition of his race and immortalize him forever among the greatest scientists and inventors mankind had ever produced.

A torch lit up in his mind, dispelling the darkness around him and giving him an unprecedented amount of mental clarity.

The dream that he wanted to achieve had always been with him from his early days. He wanted to make mechs come alive. Truly alive, in a way that gave people no doubt that the lives of their mechs were worth as much as their own lives.

"Now this is a goal that is worthy for me to pursue."

Chapter 652 Money and Tech

Lately, various distractions and events had slipped him from this dream. He had to shove it aside to address more immediate concerns, but once his life calmed down, he never really got back to it. His duties with the Vandals constantly preoccupied him with more distractions.

He was losing his drive.

"If I hadn't compared myself to the likes of the Skull Architect and the others, then I wouldn't have woken up."

This simple mental aspiration sounded short and simple, but it encompassed all of his other goals. It provided a solid direction to swim towards, enabling him to ignore any side branches that might have seduced him away from his true calling.

Making mechs alive was as impossible and fantastical as the Skull Architect's dream of designing an impossibly efficient and powerful mech! Perhaps the difficulty of achieving it even surpassed the Senior Mech Designer's ambition!

"I like it! If there is anything the Masters and Star Designers have showed the galaxy, it's that nothing is impossible!"

If a path to achieving a goal didn't exist, then a mech designer should make his own! This had always been the creed of higher-ranking mech designers.

"This is why mech designers exist!"

Having reignited his passion, Ves felt unprecedented motivated to design a mech. The only problem was that he didn't have any cause or opportunity to design a new mech!

"Damn, it's like I'm excited and raring to go, but I only have my hand to keep me company!"

The Flagrant Vandals required no new mech designs. Even if they did, only a Senior like Professor Velten had the right to lead the design projects. A small-time player like Ves could only be involved in the testing, optimization and debugging processes, which were hardly tasks that exercised his design skills.

"There's only one project available that I can spend my energy upon."

The Vandals collected all the recoverable fragments of the Vesian stealth shuttles and stored them in a forgotten corner aboard the Shield of Hispania. He intended to start working on them earlier, but his obsession with the Skull Architect's puzzle had delayed his original plans.

"Damn, Avenaeron must be pissed for me to skip the last few days."

He quickly called up the chief engineer of the Shield. Surprisingly, he didn't hold any animosity towards Ves for fudging up his appointments.

"While I'm not a mech designer, I'm still an engineer." The older man explained with a smile. "I've seen inventor types like you get inspired by something interesting before. I've learned that it's best to let people who fall into an inspired state work it out of their system on their own. Think about it. Would you be in a good mood if I abruptly pulled you out of your tinkering?"

If Ves received an interruption at any point while he worked on the Leiner Grey design, then he would have lost the thread of inspiration that had fallen into his lap. It was almost impossible for him to go back to that special mood!

"I'd be pissed and angry as hell. You've done me a huge favor. Thanks for letting me finish what I started." Ves bowed his head in genuine appreciation.

"About the stealth project, let's postpone it until later. I've gotten in touch with a potential channel that can be a massive boost to our research. We'll also be arriving at Mancroft soon, so we'll be busy with the final resupply situation."

"Those are my thoughts as well. Mancroft is a rough place, but it's the only opportunity we have left to stock up on key supplies. I suggest you take a look at our fuel stock. From my end, the fleet is definitely short on ship-grade fuels. We simply don't know how far we have to travel in the frontier. Once we run out, all of our fancy hardware will instantly become useless."

Ves nodded in agreement. "That's a good idea. There's only a couple of space stations in the entire Faris Star Region, and they are only open to pirates. Even if we can lean on Lydia's Swordmaidens for help, it's better for us to stay self-sufficient."

The alliance between the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens appeared stable on the surface, but a responsible leader needed to take contingencies into account.

"By the way Larkinson, while we can leave the procurement of supplies to Logistics, the space station itself is still worth a visit. Have you visited the black market on Harkensen III?"

"I did. A lot of shady goods and services are traded there. They're rather unusual, but none of them seem useful to us."

"Well, the stuff that ends up in the black markets in the Harkensen System is only a fraction of what the frontier exports to our star sector. A huge chunk of traffic between the frontier and our star sector goes through Mancroft as a stopover point. Lots of interesting goodies from the frontier that you can hardly find anywhere else is on display there. I highly suggest you drop by at the market section of the space station."

"Even if something catches my attention, I'm not allowed to bring anything with me, remember?"

The chief smiled lazily at Ves. "Don't let the rules stop you. If you have to cover your butt for some reason, just write some official paperwork about

procuring extra 'supplies' for a super-important project or something. You've been field-promoted to head designer, right? Just fill out a requisition form and throw it into the logs where it will quickly become a forgotten entry in the logs."

"That's an abuse of power, you know."

"Ves!" Avanaeon loudly coughed. "Abuse? What are you talking about? There's no abuse going on here. We're merely engaging in.. proactive inventory management. A bit of creative bookkeeping won't hurt the finances of the mech regiment that much."

"Whatever you say, chief. Let's just say I'll think about it and leave it at that. If nothing else, I'll visit the space station anyway for the experience alone."

After Ves ended the call, he sighed and cast his gaze at the days ahead. This wouldn't be the first time he visited the Mancroft System. Roughly two years ago, he accepted a mission from the Clifford Society to participate in a vast expedition into the frontier organized by House Kaine from the Grey Willow Star Sector.

He remembered that the expeditionary fleet resupplied at Mancroft as well before they crossed the border into lawless space.

"Back then, the expeditionary fleet was so powerful that House Kaine even turned a recommissioned fleet carrier into their flagship."

The might of their expeditionary fleet allowed them to deter a huge amount of pirate raiders. Yet even with all of that power at their disposal, they still encountered lots of setbacks. Their ships and mechs might have scared off the riff raff, but the major pirate factions as well as the alien sandmen were undeterred.

"The frontier isn't safe. The near-disaster of the Groening Mission already proves that every time you enter it, you gamble with your lives."

It was also little wonder that Lord Kaine's expedition found lots of problems in finding willing mech designers to join them as they jumped into the proverbial abyss. Most of them were bookworms, not adventurers! Only a greedy idiot like Ves jumped into the fray without taking stock of the many risks involved.

He suddenly had the sense that history might repeat itself. Would the Flagrant Swordmaidens encounter the same problems that plagued the previous expeditionary fleet?

The more he thought about it, the more he feared the prospect of another tour into lawless space. Even though Lydia's Swordmaidens fit right at home in the frontier, that didn't mean the Flagrant Vandals could rely completely on their ally's home advantage to avoid the crises that might occur in this perilous space.

"The most they can do is rely on their network of contacts and alliances to force the local pirate groups back. They can't do anything if a sandmen fleet decides to suck out all of our energy."

Pirates only formed one threat among many in the frontier. Perils from fellow competitors, alien races and natural hazards only piled up on the misery, causing most prospective colonists and exiles to lose their lives within a decade of setting shop in frontier space.

"They don't call it the untamed stars for nothing. There is no order and guarantee of safety in this wild region of space."

This time, they had the advantage of being accompanied by a local ally. The downside was that the Flagrant Swordmaidens hadn't brought a sufficiently domineering spaceborn fleet. The major pirate factions could easily muster up enough mechs to challenge them head-on, and if they encountered a major sandman force, they could only run as fast as possible.

A quiet day went by as Ves mulled over the threats they might face. Visions of various disasters haunted him at night, which completely obliterated his highly motivated state. He wouldn't be able to design mechs at all in his depressingly worried mood.

His routine morning meeting with the mech designers went poorly as Ves became distracted on what precautions he should take. While it was easy to leave his safety up to the planning of the Swordmaidens and the Vandals, he disliked being at the mercy of someone else. He experienced too many times where all the best laid plans went to hell due to an unexpected occurrence.

Ves developed a healthy respect for the frontier, so he planned to make some additional preparations. "I need to upgrade my personal gear."

Besides his military-issued equipment, he also tinkered together a rudimentary jamming device and stealth detector. While they were small and portable, their range and power left much to be desired.

The root of the problems he had with both devices was that their batteries were seriously deficient. It was like depending on a hamster running on a wheel to power the energy demands of an aircar. The two operated on completely different energy scales!

"I know that better batteries exist."

The Amastendira was the most exquisite example to date. Powered by an infinitely rechargeable battery that possibly drew its juice from zero-point energy, it showed how compact and powerful a battery could become. Naturally, it was impossible for Ves to replicate first-class technology out here in the galactic boondocks.

The shield generator gifted to him by Master Olson formed a more attainable to Ves. He had carefully studied the device extensively without risking its

integrity and he found the amazing device possessed a powerful battery made almost exclusively from high-grade exotics.

The total size of that battery could fit in the palm of his hand.

While he didn't have access to any high-grade exotics or the requisite technology to form them into an ultracompact battery, he might still be able to pick something up at one of Mancroft's many markets.

"Still.. high grade exotics costs a lot of money. A single gram of some valuable substance can be worth a billion bright credits. How can I possibly pay for all that stuff?"

Embezzlement? No way something like that would work! Lieutenant Commander Soapstone watched their available funds like a hawk. Small sums might pass by her notice, but a jumbo charge of over a billion credits would easily come to the forefront of her vision.

Should he pay for them out of his own pocket? "That's going to be difficult since I put restrictions on my bank accounts."

He still had a small fortune stashed away in his accounts. Through the dividends the LMC paid out since he left, they should have gained several hundred million bright credits at the very least.

Fortunately, a lot of commerce took place in Mancroft. The space station hosted several sector-wide bank branches. As long as he paid a personal visit and verified his identity, it wouldn't be difficult to momentarily unlock his accounts.

"That takes care of the money. What about the technology?"

Ves furrowed his brows. That would be much harder to get ahold of. An ultracompact battery wasn't exactly common in this area of space.

Chapter 653 Compromised Comms

The best gadgets came about through a combination of resources and tech. Sometimes, both could be acquired by money.

"Yet not everything can be obtained by money."

He also couldn't go too far in pursuing his private pursuits. He knew that the Vandals put a lot of surveillance on him. The mech regiment's all-encompassing internal sensors caught everything that happened within their ships. Even if Ves stepped outside the Shield of Hispania and did some private business on Mancroft's space station, his actions would still be noted by a hidden bug or a security officer following him from a distance.

"Even if I do some shady dealings, I can't do anything that compromises the Vandals or our upcoming mission."

That limited his options a lot. Ves figured he could still get by with obtaining materials at Mancroft, but obtaining the tech that transformed the exotic materials into powerful but stable batteries was another matter.

Ves turned around his desk and activated his terminal. He logged into the central database to see whether the central database contained a blueprint or a textbook of sorts.

The library didn't contain anything useful. The books Ves had access to only dealt with mech-sized energy cells and battery packs. Miniaturizing them into the size of his palm never fell within the scope of those books.

It was a different case for certain specialist blueprints. Ultracompact batteries showed up several times, as certain gadgets and devices required use of such a powerful component.

Nonetheless, Ves only received permission to read a short description of the blueprints. Accessing the entire schematics and specifications went far beyond his current authorization.

"Damn, what's the point of making me aware of this tech in the first place?!" He cursed. "It's like dangling a carrot before the horse, but never letting the poor creature take a bite!"

He could look at the summary all he wanted, but it contained none of the instructions that enabled Ves to reproduce an ultracompact battery.

Restricted from contacting his other channels, Ves only figured out three possible alternatives.

"First, I can scrounge up some money from the bank branch and hope I can find the technical specs in the black market."

He didn't have much hopes for this option, as tech like ultracompact batteries went beyond most other tech he came into contact with in the Komodo Star Sector. Pirated or bootleg copies of ultracompact battery schematics shouldn't be casually for sale in some dingy booth deep within the bowels of a grungy trade station.

The second option was to beg the Vandals or the Mech Corps to grant him access to the schematics in the central database.

He snorted. "Fat chance any of that will happen. I can't come up with a decent excuse why I need access to this tech."

A bigger issue involved with this route was that Ves needed to gain direct permission from Colonel Lowenfield herself. Due to her possibly complex history with his uncle Ark back when she served at Citadel Havensworth, Ves grew very leery at the thought of conversing with her directly. From everything she had heard about the highly regarded colonel from the Vandals, the woman was as shrewd as a snake.

No way Ves would voluntarily serve himself up to her on a plate. "She probably doesn't have enough clout to grant me the necessary authorization anyway."

What else could he do? His final option involved asking for a favor from someone far more dangerous than Colonel Lowenfield.

"Am I really considering the option of asking for another favor from the Skull Architect?"

The Vandals tacitly approved of his attempt to ingratiate himself with the Skull Architect because the fugitive mech designer wielded a vast amount of influence in the Faris Star Region. Tacitly did not mean full-throated support. The man's notoriety with the MTA made Major Verle apprehensive about establishing formal ties. It wouldn't reflect well on their record.

And this venture depended entirely on whether the Skull Architect possessed the requisite knowledge in the first place. Did Senior Mech Designers from the Friday Coalition have the right to access this tech? Ves leaned towards no because their star sector simply wasn't developed enough.

"I'll have to ask the man when I'm finally granted an audience with him. He's sure taking his time to address his mail."

None of the options so far sounded good. Ves tried to wrack his brains for alternatives. He ruled out contacting his Master, but he gave the Clifford Society a shot. He quickly logged into their virtual portal's marketplace but found no trace of any supremely advanced human-scale tech. The only products available consisted of finished products, and they required an obscene amount of merits as well as a higher rank within the organization to obtain.

"Obviously, this isn't tech that Apprentice Mech Designers are supposed to get into contact with." He concluded after reading the unspoken message behind these restrictions.

His best bet appeared to be making a possible deal with the Skull Architect. If Ves guessed right that Reno Jimenez possessed the specifications or at least

the theory on how to build an ultracompact battery, then he had the opportunity to trade for these goodies.

"The biggest issue here is that I have to offer something worthwhile to convince him to trade for those tech specifications."

Ves grew weary at the thought of entering into a bargain with a man that once ordered the death of an expert pilot. Someone who possessed so few scruples that he even dared to have designs on a demigod would surely not be satisfied with mere trifles.

"Even so, it's impossible for me to give what he really wants."

Knowledge of Spirituality and a rudimentary understanding of the X-Factor were some of his most prized assets. If someone else knew more about Spirituality than him, then they certainly weren't around here to compete against him. As the only holder of these secrets, Ves possessed a monopoly on this aspect.

Holding a monopoly was lucrative. And dangerous. Ves put most of his hopes in the advantage that he gained, and planned to milk it for all it was worth until his enterprises grew to encompass the entirety of human space!

The potential profits and sales he could achieve from this advantage was enough to make the rich princes from the galactic center salivate. That made this arrangement extremely dangerous to Ves. Almost every mech designer would kill to possess this knowledge.

Therefore, for safety and profit's sake, he needed to figure out another way to please one of the most powerful mech designers in the Faris Star Region.

Sometime later, Ves received a short call from Mayra aboard the Jaded Sword.

"Larkinson, my mentor has finally gotten in touch with me."

The moment he waited for had finally arrived. "What's the verdict."

"He declined to tell me. But the news is good. He informed me he wants to conduct a secure conversation with you at the soonest. You better contact him quickly, because he doesn't suffer tardiness gladly."

Ves frowned a bit. "What does he consider secure?"

"He doesn't trust the quantum entanglement nodes aboard your mech regiment's ship. And for a discussion as sensitive as I think it is, he won't be satisfied with ours either."

"If the Skull Architect doesn't trust any quantum entanglement node, then how can I get into touch with him in the first place?"

"You can book a secure comm booth at Mancroft Station. The Independent Harbor is one of the few places which hosts a Tzianti crystal. Have you heard of it before?"

"I can't say that I have."

"Well, a Tzianti crystal is a relic from the long-dead Tzianti race that used to live in the frontier. They work on an entirely different principle than our quantum entanglement nodes, but the effects are similar that they can establish point-to-point real-time communications. The major downsides are that these crystals are very large and unwieldy and their bandwidth is awful. They strain and crack from use and it takes a generous application of expensive materials to repair these cracks."

"If they're so unwieldy, why use them at all?"

"Because the MTA, CFA or any of the other big organizations aren't listening in. The other end of the nodes aren't installed in a central facility which is under their management. Each end of the crystal is accounted for and under constant guard. It's primitive compared to quantum tech, but it's something the

pirate factions have complete control over. There's a crystal at Mancroft that corresponds to a crystal in Malligan's Stop."

"I see." Ves nodded. "Even if it's a crappy means of communications, it's their only means of instant communications that's outside of the control of the authorities."

The trans-galactic enterprises that mass-produced the quantum entanglement nodes possessed an oligopoly on the technology. With the MTA and CFA's blessings, the alliance that was collectively called the Comm Consortium wasn't shy about throwing their weight around. Not only did it cost a fortune to obtain a node, but the other end of the node always led to a central hub that contained millions if not billions of nodes.

The official reason the Comm Consortium gave out for setting up these hubs was that it facilitated instantaneous communication from across the galaxy. The galactic net wouldn't be so all-encompassing without the node hubs. Yet everyone and their mother knew the true reason the CC set up the hubs was to eavesdrop on every scrap of data that passed through their network. True point-to-point communications couldn't be done through the galactic net because the CC controlled every aspect of the network except for the user end!

Each time one of them called someone up from their comms or accessed the galactic net, they were pretty much doing so in plain view of the Comm Consortium!

Mayra sent him the protocols to establish a Tzianti connection to Malligan's Pitstop. This allowed him entry into any comm facility that possesses a Tzianti crystal that was paired with one at the pirate station.

"It'll mostly be other pirate stations which are connected to each other." She said just before she ended the call. "As far as I'm aware of, the Tzianti crystal

at Mancroft is secure. The only way a Tzianti crystal can be read is through a single port drilled into its core. If you're skeptical, the facility allows you to inspect and scan the entire arrangement. Pirates are incredibly distrustful of each other, so these checks happen every day."

That still didn't rule out more sophisticated methods of eavesdropping, but if he could think about it, so could others. Ves simply had to trust the pirates knew what they were doing when they set those crystals up.

After the quick call, Ves prepared for his upcoming visit to Mancroft. He skipped out on visiting the Independent Harbor during the previous expedition because of its terrible reputation and the very real dangers aboard the notorious space station.

Pirates, smugglers, treasure hunters, salvagers and other rough-and-tumble spacers and adventurers congregated to the last port to the frontier. While true pirate scum didn't dare to enter the Mancroft System, the marginal types that received permission to cross over to civilized space were already sufficiently intimidating.

The naive and inexperienced Ves of before had grown up now. Even if only a couple of years had passed, Ves felt as if a lifetime had passed between his two visits of the Mancroft System.

Back then, he would have been shaking in his shoes at the thought of stepping foot on Mancroft Station.

Now? He couldn't imagine why he was so scared in the first place. It was just a black market hub! "Though strangely enough, they are performing all of these shady deals within throwing distance of a CFA fueling station. Well, whatever. If the CFA isn't cracking down on this business, then it's probably okay to step foot on the station."

If anyone dared to find trouble with him, he would deal with them like he did with all troublemakers he came across!

Chapter 654 Shared Ambition

As the combined fleet of the Flagrant Swordmaidens collectively transitioned out of FTL at the edge of the small Mancroft System, they immediately noticed the company.

The red dwarf system was as sad and lifeless as always. The Mancroft Independent Harbor orbited around a sad-looking rock close to the weak red dwarf that formed the center of the system.

A bit further ahead, a small squadron of CFA warships patrolled the space around their slightly precious fueling station. Though the patrol only consisted of four frigates led by a single destroyer, it possessed more than enough firepower to chew through a third-class spaceborn mech division!

When Ves gazed at the magnified sensor readings of the small but deadly warships, he admired their deadly prowess in space. Their weaponry possessed enough power to tear through combat carriers within seconds. The range of their huge mech-sized missiles could cross entire star systems, while their state-of-the-art sublight propulsion allowed it to outrun the swiftest light mechs by an entire order of magnitude!

"Warships are the natural predators of spaceborn combat!"

Ves loved mechs with all his heart, but he was realistic enough to recognize the primacy of warships as humanity's ultimate weapons of war.

"Ketis."

"Yeah, mister?"

Ves coughed. "Don't call me that. If I'm supposed to tutor you, then you should call me teacher."

The young woman seemed disinterested in acknowledging him as her teacher. She was only a few years younger than him, so she still had trouble getting her mind around the fact that he was so far ahead in their shared profession. It also didn't help that she never interacted much with men.

He didn't care too much about her feelings. As long as she internalized his lessons, she could hate him for all he cared.

"Look at these warships. Even if they consist of the smallest and lightest classes, they are more than enough to wipe out our entire combined fleet off the face of the galaxy. How does that make you feel?"

The girl looked uncertain on how to answer such a question. "It's unfair. Why does the the CFA keep all the good things to themselves? If the people of the frontier were free to operate warships, then we could have gotten rid of the entire sandmen race ourselves!"

Ves shook his head. "I wasn't talking about politics. Put yourself in the perspective of a mech designer. What do you feel about warships?"

"I still feel they're unfair. They're too powerful for their own good. The best mechs we can design won't come close to matching a thousandth of the firepower that destroyer can spit out. It's like comparing a mouse to a tiger. No matter how good the mouse has adapted to its environment, it can't pose any threat against a tiger. And tigers are the least the mouse has to worry about."

"That's a common observation to make." Ves spoke neutrally. ""The largest limitation concerning mechs in comparison to warships is the scale of the machines and their weapons. A main cannon of a battleship can be up to several kilometers long and its main caliber is wide enough to wedge through an entire corvette. Against this awesome might, why not pursue a larger mech frame?"

"Is this a history quiz or something?" Ketis looked exasperated to Ves. "Mayra taught me that we tried once. The Juggernauts, right? The New Rubarth Empire barely got them to work, and they eventually found out it wasn't worth the effort. A single Juggernaut is as powerful as a destroyer or cruiser, but it's as slow as a snail and their size makes them an easy target to long-ranged artillery. It's got all the downsides of a heavy mech but multiplied by at least a hundred times."

The Rubarthans had gotten the Juggernauts to work in some cases, but these titanic mechs generally weren't worth the effort. Developing a single Juggernaut sucked up as much funding as raising another mech division, which could be employed with much greater versatility and flexibility.

"Mechs are not cut out to be warship-sized monstrosities. They are as large as a typical office building in a city district because that is the size that affords them the best balance between mobility, protection and cost-effectiveness. If you look through the history of mechs throughout the generations, you'll notice they've slowly inched upwards in size, as better technology allows them to move faster at the same amount of bulk. Nonetheless, they aren't going to grow to the size of a frigate anytime soon."

"Then what's the point of telling me this?" She growled. "Thinking about this stuff makes my head hurt. Why can't you teach me something that will help me design better mechs."

Ves tutted to her. "That's where you're wrong. It's true that your basic skills need work, but that can be fixed with study and time. What you truly lack is something that can't be learned from a book. Back to the comparison I was making, doesn't it make you frustrated that no matter how well we design our mechs, we can never match up to the power of even the lightest warship classes?"

That wasn't exactly true, as he once heard rumors of cutting-edge mechs in development from the galactic designer that could stand toe-to-toe with warships, but something like that wouldn't show up in the frontier.

"What are you getting at?"

"It's simple. While mechs are prominent and popular right now, in truth they play second fiddle in the defense of humanity. When the aliens decide to go on the offensive against us, it's not our mechs which will save us, but the warships of the CFA. Doesn't it rankle you that mechs are ultimately toys in the greater scheme of things?"

Though Ketis hadn't answered yet, a fire of indignation burned within her eyes. Ves smiled in satisfaction at achieving the desired effect.

"When mechs first came into being, they were new and impressive but could never match up against the power of warships. Four-hundred years later, mechs have become more powerful, but ships fitted for war have not remained stagnant either. Don't you think that this is a huge shame?"

She nodded. "I guess so."

"So do I! Mech designers aren't content to play the supporting characters in the story of human civilization. We call this era the Age of Mechs, yet its very name rings hollow! Won't it be better for us if mechs became powerful enough to defeat warships? It is the common mission of every mech designer to elevate the weapons we design into the ultimate machines of war! Tell me, don't you feel excited about this dream?"

"T-That's preposterous!" Ketis widened her eyes. "Those big battleships are impossible to take down! There's no way a mech can withstand that much firepower!"

"Just because it's impossible today doesn't mean the same applies tomorrow. Mech designers are constantly at work at new designs, new technologies and

new combinations. We do this not just to pursue our own interests, but also to push mechs to greater heights."

For the next half hour, Vex explained and rambled a bit about the collective expectations and responsibilities of a mech designer. Being a mech designer was more than about designing a mech, though they at least needed to be proficient at this task to deserve this mantle.

While these huge and seemingly unattainable aspirations never interested most mech designers, Vex believed that everyone who was serious about their profession should at least be aware of it. Mech design had chugged along for more than four-hundred years now without a discernible change in the power balance of mechs.

It was rather depressing when mech designers thought about it. Several centuries of focused research from billions if not trillions of mech designers failed to elevate mechs into the supreme weapons of war the start of the Age of Mechs tried to spark. This failure rankled every mech designer who cared about it. Mechs had failed to live up to the promise as the perfect fighting machine.

Ketis didn't hide her gaping yawn. "This is interesting and all, but are you done yet? This lecture is one of the most boring ones I've ever endured, and I've been through some awful ones when Mayra forced me to sit through those virtual classes."

"I'm doing you a favor, you brat. You need to understand the importance of mech designers in human society."

"Yeah, as if. We Swordmaidens don't need to pay any attention to what goes on in civilized space. You just do your thing and I do my thing and we both won't bother each other. That's how it always goes."

Ves took a tired breath. Getting this brat of a mech designer to soak up the principles he tried to espouse was a bit more difficult than he assumed. He thought he had made a good attempt at shaking her out of her complacency yesterday, but he was very much aware that the process of fixing her up wasn't close to being done."

The vessels of the Flagrant Swordmaidens slowly entered the inner portion of this pathetically small star system. The dim red dwarf burned as lethargically as ever. Though it looked impressive up close like all stars, its low luminosity made it difficult to navigate towards. The only way to reach the Mancroft System was to jump to a closer and brighter star system before dialing in the much-closer red dwarf system.

Nonetheless, despite the difficulty of reaching this oft-frequented but largely forgettable stopping point, a lot of outfits brought their fleets to Mancroft for some reason. More than thirty different organized fleets had parked themselves at a healthy distance from each other in the proximity of Mancroft Independent Harbor.

Ves cursed a bit as he recognized a familiar outfit. "Damn it, what are the Caged doing here?!"

The powerful gang from the Roppo Principality attempted to join forces with the Masters of Combat after departing from the Harkensen System. If the Flagrant Swordmaidens hadn't dropped by to crash their party, then the Caged Masters would have become a force to be reckoned with, especially on land.

Major Verle decided to crush the Masters of Combat at all costs, feeling no qualms about letting the Caged abandon their allies and flee like rats. Though Ves expected the Caged wouldn't give up so easily, meeting them again so soon raised his hackles.

"Do you recognize the outfit the ships of the Caged have partnered with? They aren't transmitting any IFFs that correspond to a state."

Ketis stepped closer to the projection and studied the ships and what little information the sensors picked up. Her eyes narrowed in recognition.

"I know who these bastards are. They call themselves the Red Tongues and they're some of the worst pieces of trash in the neighborhood. The Caged have made a big mistake if they think they can trust their new buddies."

Ves wasn't familiar with any of the pirate organizations from the frontier. "What makes the Red Tongues so reviled by you?"

"Those lunatics all cut off their tongues and transplant the tongue of some disgusting half-ooze half-frog exobeast. Their new tongues are red and they're highly acidic. Their tongues can melt through combat armor if given time."

"Won't they melt their own mouths if they do that?"

"Oh, they would have done themselves a favor if they all died from that, but they aren't completely dumb. Before they transplant the tongues, they put each prospective member through a brutal regime of genetic modification. Their mouths and their digestive systems are all transformed beyond belief. By the time all of the operations are done, a new Red Tongue is born."

"Why go through all of this torture?"

"Because they like to eat. They disdain eating normal food that normal humans eat. Instead, they like to devour creatures while they are still alive, preferably. They get off on the fear of what they are chewing through. Their favorite foods are dangerous exobeasts, but there are rumors that they've acquired a taste for other humans."

Other humans! "They're cannibals?!"

"Oh yeah, but the Red Tongues are really good at covering their tracks. Nobody has ever succeeded in catching them in the act, but they'll slip up sooner or later."

"If these suspected cannibals are as awful as you suggested, why hasn't anyone done anything to them yet?" He asked with evident puzzlement on his face.

"It's complicated. Just like how we allied with a lot of pirate groups, the Red Tongues have taken shelter under one of the biggest pirate factions in the Faris Star Region. The Red Tongues fit right in with them, as they're the bloodiest and most ruthless factions in the local region. There are two major pirate factions in total who have the most say around there. The smaller pirate organizations can't hold a candle against their might and numbers."

Ves could hardly imagine why a pirate faction thought it would be a good idea to shelter a group of suspected cannibals.

Chapter 655 Pirate Blocs

As the Flagrant Swordmaidens brought their combined fleet closer to the only public space station in the star system, some of the fleets around them showed some reaction.

Many fleets proactively moved their parking orbit further and further away. Lydia's Swordmaidens enjoyed a decent amount of notoriety in the frontier, while the Flagrant Vandals always seemed to cause death and chaos wherever it went.

Leaving religion aside, humanity had never fully shed its tendency to believe in superstition. Pirates leaned on them all the time, and right now they came under the sway of the supposed cloud of misfortune that surrounded the Flagrant Vandals.

Ves saw the dots representing the positions of their ships and scoffed at their behavior. In an age like this, almost every form of superstition had been systematically debunked. Nonetheless, humans could be as stupid and impressionable as ever.

"Please tell me a bit more about the pirate factions that rule over the Faris Star Region. Which pirate faction is depraved enough to take these Red Tongues under their wing?"

The horned woman sighed. She unconsciously dragged over her floating scabbard and raked its surface with her fingers.

"I'll give you the short version. Pirates don't tend to like being under the thumb of someone else. By far most of the pirate groups like to stay independent and do their own thing."

"How do these independents manage to stay alive?"

"Well, most of them crash and burn pretty soon. Some are lucky enough to survive through the cracks. Most try and make pacts with fellow pirates. The Swordmaidens are kind of like that. We created a web of allies that looks out for each other in case any of the big boys want to bully one of us."

That didn't sound very stable to Ves. These fair-weather friends only stuck together so long as the situation benefited them. They would certainly drop support for the Swordmaidens if someone threatening enough put blades against their throats.

"The independents number the most, but the most powerful pirates are actually two different pirate blocs. They're massive alliances centered around the biggest pirate groups in the Faris Star Region. The ones that subjugated the Red Tongues is the Ravienne Alliance."

Ves looked up in recognition at the mention of Ravienne. He occasionally saw that name pop up in the news. "I've heard of her name before. Isn't she that

madwoman from the Hexadric Hegemony who was so crazy that even her fellow matriarchs couldn't stand her any longer?"

"Ravienne is one of the scariest pirates in the Faris Star Region and you should never refer to her by any insults. If any of her underlings like the Red Tongues hear you call her that, they'll jump on you and tear you apart before sending off your bleeding flesh to Ravienne as tribute."

"She has that much sway in the region?"

"Her influence is unimaginable. Even though she's bloodthirsty and cruel, she's also a brilliant strategist and tactician. She rose up from nothing and took the entire star region by storm when Ravienne's Ravagers became the leader of a new bloc of pirates. By now, the Ravienne Alliance is the largest and most powerful gathering of the vilest scum and trash that call themselves pirates. If you think the Red Tongues are bad, the other subordinate gangs are worse."

The picture she painted of the Ravienne Alliance made them sound both powerful and chaotic. Even their leader was prone to mood swings and outbursts of violence. If not for her former background as a matriarch of the Hegemony, she might have long lost control over her own organization.

"How are they able to stay together?"

"Well, they don't, really. There's lots of infighting going on in the alliance. Every gang wants to prove to the Ravagers that they're crueler and more conniving than the others. They frequently kill each other, but they never seem to run out of fresh blood. Many pirate groups are clamoring to become a member of their alliance."

This sounded awful to Ves. If Ketis described the truth and the subordinate gangs under Ravienne did indeed eliminate the weakest among them,

eventually her organization would be left with the toughest, meanest and most adaptable pirates.

Perhaps Ravienne deliberately fanned the flames in order to let natural selection take its course.

"You mentioned there are two major pirate alliances." Ves spoke, not wanting to dig further into Ravienne's gruesome culling methods. "Which pirates are brave enough to fight against Ravienne?"

"The Dragons of the Void." She replied. "Hmm? You heard of them?"

"I even encountered them in the flesh several times. They're true bastards who treat their men like cannon fodder. Somehow, they've gotten really good at brainwashing their fellow pirates. Is it true that everyone in their sway gets turned into drones?"

Ketis adopted a distasteful expression. "That's one of their scariest aspects. The Dragons of the Void own a lot of space stations in the local star region. At the end of a raid, pirates still need a place to sell their loot, resupply their exhausted inventory and fix up their damaged mechs and ships. The space stations set up by the Dragons are all placed in strategic star systems. It's easy to enter the system, but not so easy to leave."

"The last time I saw them, they were literally throwing thousands of mech pilots and mechs against several military mech divisions! How come they've brainwashed so many pirates, and how do they get away with it in the first place?!"

"That's one of the hazards of operating in the frontier." She shrugged. "The Dragons of the Void claim they are snatching pirates at their space stations because they broke the rules or can't repay their debt. I don't know if I buy that. Mayra once told me that if the space station is too quiet, the Dragons pick a random pirate group and attempt to take them into custody on some

trumped-up charges. Nobody is around at these times to dispute the charges, and nobody has ever succeeded in disproving the accusations."

This situation truly sounded broken to Ves. While the Dragons of the Void would be able to grow powerful enough to flood their enemies with worthless mechs, it didn't sound like they inspired much loyalty.

"I find it hard to believe that any pirate group will voluntarily submit to the Dragons."

"It's never 'voluntary', you can say. The Dragons have a way of pressuring pirate groups into working for them. The Dragon Alliance is much more orderly and organized, but the hierarchy practically never budes. The core members of the Dragons of the Void can issue any orders they want. The vassal pirates serving underneath them do most of the actual work. They're barely better off than their brainwashed cousins because they at least haven't been put through a brainwashing regime."

After Ketis described the two major pirate blocs, Ves finally understood why Lydia's Swordmaidens hadn't taken the initiative to pledge allegiance to either power blocs! Faced with either endless bloodshed or possible brainwashing, it was no wonder that many independent pirate groups tend to stay away from these behemoths.

The last time Ves had visited the frontier, he rode with some foreigners who originated outside of the Komodo Star Sector. The retainers and household troops of House Kaine never really cared about the local powers that be, a mistake that proved very costly to them. Ves barely knew what went on in the frontier back then, so he made full use of being in the company of a native daughter of the frontier.

As Ketis described each of the pirate gangs she recognized from the fleets parked close to the Independent Harbor, the Flagrant Swordmaidens slowly

entered their designated position. Each fleet orbited far above the tiny rock that anchored the orbit of the space station.

It took a bit of tricky maneuvering to retain their distance from all of the other parked fleets, but the Vandals and the Swordmaidens eventually reached their designated stops.

Ves noticed that neither of their forces let down their guard. With all of the pirate gangs and shady outfits congregating in the Mancroft System, conflict could break out at any moment. Scores of spaceborn mechs deployed from the hangar bays of the Flagrant Swordmaidens and formed into groups to patrol their immediate perimeter of space.

Inheritors upgraded with anti-stealth detectors happened to deploy as well. As Ves zoomed in on the plot, he called up the telemetry of one of the mechs, making use of his privileges as a head designer. The Inheritor was blasting its sensitive and fragile sensor array at half strength.

Both Ves and Ketis received an alert from their comms. Both of them received an announcement from their commanders.

"Hmm." Ves grunted. "Finally, some common sense. Anyone approved to step aboard Mancroft Station has to go in full combat gear."

Ketis grinned at that. "It's been a long time since I frightened off some rats!"

The Flagrant Vandals were about to step in the frontier, so they needed to play by their rules. One of the biggest differences between Mancroft and Harkensen was that the former didn't guarantee anyone's security.

Oh certainly, the Bosey Clan largely kept the peace, but even if they claimed to be the official rulers of the Independent Harbor, they never did a good job at stopping disputes. Part of it came from their desire to avoid pissing powerful pirates off. As long as the Boseys never made any enemies, they didn't have to deal with a challenge to their regime.

Every visitor that stepped foot on Mancroft was responsible for their own security. Though incidental visitors could hire some of the local mercenaries as guards, the Vandals and the Swordmaidens could take care of themselves.

The Swordmaidens were accustomed to being armed to the teeth whenever they entered pirate stations. Though Mancroft Independent Harbor wasn't a pirate station on paper, in practice there was hardly any difference.

As Ves had plenty of business to do at the Independent Harbor, the Vandals saw fit to provide him with an armed escort of four security officers. In addition, they brought him a custom-fitted suit of combat armor, modified for 'frontier cultural expectations', whatever that meant.

It didn't take long for his escorts to arrive with his combat armor in tow.

"Mr. Larkinson! It's good to see you again!"

Ves recognized the familiar voice. "Lieutenant Nolsen Feray! Aren't you assigned to the Finmoth Regal?"

"They transferred me here to lead your guard escort. It makes sense since we've already travelled together. I'm familiar with some of your habits. I'll make sure you'll stay nice and safe at Mancroft."

Ves smiled sardonically at his escorts. All of them came in suits of hulking exoskeleton armor that must have weighed as much as a horse. Not only did they come in the most powerful infantry armor in the Vandal armory, the armorers also saw fit to.. add some creative additions.

"What's with the medals, spikes and bling?"

An ordinary suit of exoskeleton armor resembled a smoothed or angular humanoid mech in miniature size. Right now, the burgundy-and-red suits of powered armor gained a lot of decorative golden frills along with the oversized medals pinned to the chest that made it look like they were prepared for a

parade. Ves wasn't even sure if half of those medals actually existed in the Mech Corps!

The only addition that made the suits of armor seem like they were not to be trifled with was the extra spikes. They shot out of the shoulder pauldrons, the helmet, the arm guards as well as the leg guards. Hell, they looked nasty enough to bleed out a random passerby in seconds if they accidentally bumped into these sharpened spikes!

The helmets even received a visual makeover. The face-plates had been shaped and painted over to resemble the faces of snarling stylized skulls. The eye-sockets even glowed like ominous red stars.

"If you think our getup is impressive enough, you should see what the armorers have done to your combat armor!"

Chapter 656 Mancroft Revisited

When Lieutenant Feray swung his gauntlet, commanding the floating crate behind him to set down on the deck, Ves finally beheld his new custom-made combat armor they prepared for him, even if it was a few months late.

He had long requested a suit of combat armor to replace his unwieldy and inadequate hazard suit. For some reason, he ended up in way too many combat situations for a mech designer.

Fortunately, their impending foray in the frontier had given everyone a kick in the butt. Due to the massive perils involved with crossing over into wild space, every safety regulation and procedure had been checked. Handing over suits of combat armor to the servicemen had been put on the agenda at some point.

While Ves had long looked forward to receiving an armored suit that could endure the rigors of battle, the one he received seemed.. a bit more theatrical than he expected.

Once he brought it out of the crate, Ves was able to inspect the entire ensemble's appearance.

Fundamentally, the full kit of armor had been based around a light combat armor pattern. Light in this context meant the suit was light enough to prevent burdening a servicemen who too much. Small servos and other powered assists helped with lifting the arms or moving the legs, but they were so small and limited that they only served to compensate for the modest added bulk of the armor pieces.

The helmet featured a semi-open design which in normal circumstances left the face open. In an emergency, the face-plate could quickly be affixed in place, vacuum-sealing the suit and allowing its occupant to subsist on the suit's slim oxygen reserves.

Light combat armor had never been designed for mainline infantry combatants. Instead, they were cheap but cost-effective pieces of armor to be adorned by support personnel stuck in the field. It wouldn't be able to withstand the firepower of a rifle for long, but it had never been meant to be a punching bag. The suit was light and fast enough for its wearer to dive to cover if they ever faced an attack.

"Combat armor is supposed to protect. This one adds so much bling to my person that I'm practically inviting trouble if the public sees my appearance!"

The armorer involved with customizing his suit of armor must have possessed an artist's touch. Ves felt sympathetic about any craftsman with a penchant for art because it was part of his mech design repertoire as well. Seeing similar works from others ordinarily put a smile on his face, but the work done to his abomination of a protective suit really wanted to make him pull out his own hair.

The first change was that it shared the same black-and-reddish color scheme of the Flagrant Vandals. Formally, it should have either been coated in a camouflage pattern or the default dark green color scheme of a mech designer. Painting him in the same brush as the Vandals wasn't actually proper, not that anyone this far out cared about the official regulations in the first place.

The part he objected to was the added bling, for a lack of a better word. The armor turned into some demented artist's skewed perception of what a mech designer ought to wear. Engraved with silver lines, depictions of mechs in battle adorned its surface. The armor parts partially lost their smooth organic contours and instead acquired some of the blocky mechanical shapes of a mech.

"At least the extra armor will come in handy when I get shot at." He concluded. "But do I really need to wear this thick and unwieldy cape?"

A rich burgundy cape lined with sharp black accents completed the high noble look. The fabric was thick and fluffy enough to drown half-a-dozen babies. On its back, the emblem of the Flagrant Vandals marked out the wearer's allegiance. The emblem depicted a stylized city in flames, which was apt considering the destruction the Vandals were prone to spread.

"Hopefully Mancroft won't end up in ruins by the time we leave." He muttered before turning to Lieutenant Feray. "Do I need to ask why the armor looks like what a parody of a jumped-up nouveau riche Vesian nobleman would wear?"

The security officers collectively chuffed at that.

"When in Rubarth, do as the Rubarthans do. The Swordmaidens told us that we can't rely on our name and official sanction from the Bright Republic to deter the pirates. The only language they understand is violence, and the best way to make them understand we can't be messed with is to dress like the

part. All of these modifications may be theatrics, but don't underestimate the effectiveness of posturing. The Swordmaidens have shown us that a single show of force is enough to stop unscrupulous thoughts."

Ves understood the logic behind this decision. The Flagrant Vandals ordinarily laid low when they weren't out in the field. Then they showed their fangs, but by then it was too late for their victims to save themselves.

The Vandals had a habit of understating their strength and presence when out among the public. Unlike other mech regiments, they did not excel at upfront combat. And while they valued honor and valor like any other military unit, the Vandals prized their lives over their reputation.

In the frontier, the equation was different. Reputation, fame and notoriety all added directly to an outfit's ability to survive. There was no overarching authority in charge of dispensing justice in the untamed stars, so the only form of protection outfits could rely on to deter troublemakers was their ability to look formidable.

It worked for Lydia's Swordmaidens, so it also ought to work for the Vandals.

The light combat armor prioritized protection over convenience, so it didn't disassemble in midair to encompass his body. The armor pieces had to be opened up manually, and getting kitted out took a cumbersome fifteen minutes, though much of that time had been spent on last-minute adjustments.

"This isn't a regular combat armor model." Ves noted as he experimentally tested the dexterity of his gauntlets. "I've worn some before, but they don't feel as sturdy and solid as this one."

Affixing the cape to his shoulders practically doubled his outward stature. There was a reason why capes became the favored addition to nobles

throughout the galaxy. Powerful men and women just looked better with a cloth hanging behind their backs.

Despite its complete lack of utility to the cape, Ves had the strange sense he had become a prince of the galaxy. The delusion flooded his imagination and he had to concentrate his mind in order to repress these dangerous thoughts.

"The clothes make the man." Nolsen said as he and his security officers watched Ves take in his new gear. "You're not about to turn into a commando at this rate, though, so don't think you can tear through an entire infantry regiment on your own."

"I know. It's just that this is way better than anything I've ever worn before. I'll never go back to hazard suits again if I can help it. They feel like tin cans compared to this well-crafted kit."

Nolsen taught him the ins and outs of the combat armor. The high-quality suit came with various gimmicks and auxiliary functions that made life a little bit easier for Ves if he ended up in another crisis. Its overall parameters were also very decent, almost matching the protection level of the lowest quality suit of medium combat armor.

"That's everything you need to know, Larkinson. If everything goes smoothly on Mancroft, you probably don't need to use all of these functions."

Ves nodded as he reveled in the confidence boost this suit provided him. He felt more like a soldier than ever before. Its gaudy, exaggerated appearance gave him an intimidating factor that Ves could combine with some of his Spiritual tricks.

"Alright, if that's everything, let's prepare for departure."

The Vandals and the Swordmaidens both kept their delegations small. Only a handful of shuttles from both groups departed from their carriers. Ves shared his shuttle with Lieutenant Commander Soapstone and a couple of other

logistics officers as they made their way to one of the public landing bays of the massive space station.

From the outside, Mancroft Independent Harbor looked as haphazard as always. Over the centuries, the original space station gained a lot of expansions and side modules that increased its capacity and allowed it to offer more services. Very little attention had been spent on their care, though, and its scarred, splotched and tarnished exterior bore the marks of centuries of micro-impacts.

In short, it looked exactly like Ves expected a pirate station to look like.

"Soapstone, if I recall, we already stocked up on some extra goods when we dropped off the loot we acquired from the Masters of Combat. Why do you need to step foot in Mancroft?"

The lieutenant commander wore a suit of combat armor that looked nearly identical to his. The bling adorning her armor made Ves think she looked like an admiral.

The woman grimaced. "The Swordmaidens warned us that bright credits isn't a very useful currency in the frontier. The same goes for nova sovereigns, Reinaldan marks and even coalition credits. They all lose their store of value because many pirates don't tend to trust bank servers in civilized space."

"So you're going out to exchange bright credits for hard currency?" Ves probed.

"You guessed it right. Among the hard currencies we can choose, this part of the frontier heavily favors Kavenit coins. We plan to acquire a few crates of K-coins and K-bars to facilitate trade if needed."

Ves winced at the enormous sums of currency the Vandals planned to exchange. "The horrendous exchange rate will waste a lot of money."

"We have no choice. Blame the pirates for not patching into the galactic financial network."

Kavenit was a heavy metallic substance and one of the most common low-grade exotic materials in the galaxy. It was ubiquitous enough that every star sector contained a substantial amount of ores with Kavenit present in their composition.

The exotic saw much use in various low-grade armor. In fact, the HRF armor system that Ves utilized in his Marc Antony series and portions of the Crystal Lord incorporated small amounts of Kavenit. The exotic meshed so well in countless alloys that it always held some value no matter where in the galaxy you travelled that it gained the status of a universal hard currency.

One K-coin as a piece of Kavenit stamped into a coin was called weighed one-hundred grams. The thick but compact coin looked far lighter than it actually weighed. Nobody could mistake its exceptional status when they held it in their hands, though the material's outer appearance only shone like dulled steel.

A standard K-bar made out of Kavenit was worth as much as a thousand K-coins. In turn, a massive K-slate that could only be lifted by machines was worth as much as a thousand K-bars.

"Working with hard, physical currencies is a pain in the butt." Soapstone complained. "Hauling around the K-coins and K-bars is a chore and tempts every pirate in the vicinity to rob us. We have no choice, though. The only other alternative is to barter goods with goods, and that's an even bigger headache to us than working with these primitive coins and bars."

Ves adopted a sympathetic face, but he paid a lot of attention as well. If he wanted to expand his dealings with the frontier, he needed to become familiar with matters like this. "How much is a K-coin worth these days?"

"The 'official' galactic exchange rate amounts claims that 370 bright credits can get you a single K-coin. Given the sharks we are about to approach, we'll likely have to pay upwards of 375 bright credits for a single K-coin."

That was a pretty massive hit, but neither the Vandals nor the Swordmaidens could do anything about that. Nobody offered a more favorable exchange rate in Mancroft.

Chapter 657 Public Posturing

A small convoy of shuttles slowly entered one the shuttle hangars of the Independent Harbor. After a little hitchup with what passed around for traffic control, they diverted to a VIP section and touched down amidst hundreds of other parked shuttles.

The passengers exited with their bodies fully enclosed in their protective suits of armor. While the Vandals came out with a bit of discomfort due to their gaudy and spiky additions to their armor, the Swordmaidens comfortably jumped out of their craft like it was another stroll.

Whereas the Flagrant Vandals largely adopted a uniform color scheme in dark and burgundy tones, the Swordmaidens expressed a lot more individuality. They switched out their vacuum undersuits and exobeast pelts for solid suits medium and heavy combat armor.

Though they shared the same green and blue color scheme, the Swordmaidens heavily customized their armor pieces with tribal markings and exobeast bones from deadly predators they slew by with their own swords. Skulls of real or imagined exobeasts prominently adorned their helmets.

Naturally, their broadswords and greatswords took up a prominent place on their backs. The floating scabbards keeping them sheathed fitted neatly into a standardized slot to the rear. This kept the weapons safe from prying hands.

The average bulk of the two forces differed substantially. The Vandal security officers escorting their VIPs all wore full suits of exoskeleton armor. They were power incarnate, and their heavy weapons possessed enough firepower to mow down a mob of hundreds within seconds.

The Swordmaidens only brought out a couple of suits of exoskeleton armor on their own. Most of their Swordmaidens made do with heavy armor, but that was still formidable enough in their own right.

As they walked towards the decontamination checkpoint, Ves turned his helmet towards the medium combat armor suit worn by Ketis. "I thought you Swordmaidens are fans of personal combat. Why not make more use of exoskeleton armor?"

"A sister is more machine than woman if they wear those suits." She replied over the comm channel. Right now, the entire hangar area was exposed to vacuum. "The exoskeleton armors are strong, but slow and inflexible. They're meant to carry heavy caliber cannons and the like. That's also how we make use of them. As for swordplay, exoskeleton armor is completely incompatible with it. It's as unwieldy as a heavy mech with a dagger."

Ves winced inside his helmet. The image of a heavy mech swinging around a dagger with agonizing slowness offended his sensibilities.

"Got it. I guess it makes sense that you Swordmaidens favor combat armor which is more compatible with your combat style."

"Our bodies have all gone through extensive genetic modification." Ketis added. "We may look like half-alien freaks to you, but we can swing our swords with enough force to split five men in half without any servo-assists."

Ves believed her boast. They had already shown how much damage they could inflict on their flight decks.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens both arrived at the decontamination checkpoint. If there was one thing the dangers of the frontier had taught the pirates, it was that germs could be found in every planet with life. With so many wild and untamed planets in the Faris Star Region, pirates and treasure hunters constantly contracted the rarest and most unusual diseases.

While Ves never had to worry about infections after his ordeal at Groening IV, the same couldn't be said to the rest. Even the Swordmaidens for all their genetic manipulation became prone to new alien diseases that ordinarily passed harmlessly through human bodies.

This led to the absurd situation where the decontamination protocols for pirate stations worked a bit better than those on regular space stations.

The pirates learned the hard way that spreading a single potent germ might turn entire ships and space stations into empty hulks!

The entire detour took some time, but nobody complained. The medical experts employed by the Bosey Clan took their responsibilities seriously and hardly batted an eyelid at all the unusual half-alien physiques they needed to inspect.

Once they passed the health inspections, they entered the space station proper. Each of them retracted their helmet face plates and shut off their internal air supply to conserve their oxygen.

The interior of the space station was marked with centuries worth of rust, dirt and other marks of age. It was as if the Boseys stopped caring about hygiene once the checkpoints cleared the visitors from any infectious diseases.

Overworked and severely outdated cleaning bots with so many dents that seemed as if they were kicked on a regular basis buzzed over various surfaces. Some of their sensors were so murky and fogged up that they occasionally bumped against their armored feet.

"Annoying gnat!" Ketis grunted, and performed a splendid kick against the poor scrubbing bot that collided against her greaves. The magnificently powerful kick propelled the cleaning bot into the air like a ball and caused it to crash against the partially corroded alloy wall.

Despite the impressive force behind the kick, the bot barely gained another bump. The little thing beeped some nonsensical error tones before resuming its programmed duty of scrubbing off the stains of dirt marring the deck.

"Those cleaning bots are some of the toughest I've ever seen." Ves noted with an interested eye. "The exterior of these bots are actually fashioned out of salvaged mech armor plating!"

This seemed to be a trend throughout the entire space station. Much of the interior structures and compartments were made out of salvaged and recycled ship and mech parts. It made everyone feel as if they entered a junkyard turned into a slum.

As they all entered deeper into the station proper, the Vandals and Swordmaidens split up to run their own errands. Ves separated from Soapstone and the other Vandals on a shopping spree in order to take care of his own matters.

Their appearances had already attracted enough attention already. The exaggerated additions to their armor suits had increased their intimidation factor to the point where almost every visitor parted in their way.

Ves evoked different reactions from his better-armed security escort due to his slimmer form and his billowing cape. The fabric caught easily in the air, but possessed enough weight at the bottom to prevent it from smacking in the face of someone walking behind.

While Ves wasn't the only person in the station who wore a cape, for some unspoken reason only the higher-ranking members of the outfit wore them.

This caused many more eyes to stare at Ves, wondering what position a young man like him held to deserve this impressive privilege.

"

The only ones who refused to make way were those who wore similar gear. Men and women from other outfits adhered to the same rules of showing off their prowess, so they all came geared for war.

Each group of armed and armored men tread confidently through the public areas of the space station. Encountering rival groupings on the street led to sparks of tension, but the friction never led to conflict.

The Bosey Clan did not appreciate fighting within their space station. Mancroft was a very useful stopping point to pirates so they generally wanted to keep it intact. Any attempts to sow death and chaos meant making an enemy out of all the pirates docked to the space station.

The glares the other pirates directed to Ves and the Vandals only served to measure their grit. There were plenty of playboys on this station that pretended to be greater than they actually were. The Flagrant Vandals were the real deal, so they stared right back with provoking glances.

"This is getting rather tiresome." Ves muttered after fending off yet another unspoken challenge to their right to carry around so much bling. "If pirates have to deal with this stuff each time they step into public, then I would rather stay back in civilized space."

This sounded absurd to Ketis. "I don't see what the big deal is. Don't you always have to look tough when you pass by some pirates?"

"It's not as automatic to us as it is for you. It's not polite to stare people in the eyes with a greedy expression."

She shrugged. "Sometimes I don't know how you people in civilized space managed to stay alive. How can you scare off muggers when you aren't able to show you're strong enough to beat them up?"

"We have a thing called law and order there. The police or planetary guard will step in if someone tries to rob you in their jurisdiction."

Ketis looked speechless at that. Police? Planetary Guard? What did those words mean?

Ves brushed aside her confusion and activated a navigation app on his comm. With Ketis, Nolsen and three more exoskeleton brutes in tow, he followed the directions projected by his comm towards the only comm center in Mancroft.

They walked past various Bosey guards in heavy and exoskeleton armor. Ves walked up in front of the desk and greeted the clerk.

"I'd like to establish a connection to Malligan's Pitstop via your Tzianti crystal."

The clerk perked up at that. Communicating through Tzianti crystals only happened for important transmissions. "Do you have a referral or a set of protocols?"

"I have the right protocols."

Ves transmitted the files to the clerk, who inspected them before determining they were valid.

"Everything is in order. The Tzianti crystal connected to Malligan's Pitstop is available for your use. The price for a single transmission is currently set at thirteen K-coins per minute. If you wish to inspect them under heavy supervision of our own experts, you may do so for an additional fee of two-hundred K-coins."

Ves almost wanted to slap the clerk's face for charging such a ridiculous. Thirteen K-coins amounted to five-thousand bright credits! Still, Ves had no

cause for complaint, as using the crystals introduced cracks that needed special materials to repair. Besides, someone like Ves hardly blinked his eyes anymore when he spent a couple of thousand bright credits.

"We'll pay."

Luckily, he was authorized to use the regimental account for this expenditure. Since he got someone else to pay his fees, Ves might as well take full advantage of it. He requested to make a personal inspection, which the clerk accepted like he already expect it. Ves was not the first customer to be paranoid enough to double-check the comm center's arrangements.

The clerk led him down a stairway and into a heavily-fortified compartment. Roving patrols of Bosey guards occasionally passed them by.

The inspection didn't take very long. Ves was mildly impressed as he beheld the house-sized crystal. He whipped out his multiscanner from the toolbelt he had wrapped around his armor and methodically scanned the entire space.

Due to time concerns, he couldn't spend as much time as he wished, but his inspection was thorough enough to reveal that the Boseys had indeed kept the chamber free from bugs.

At some point further inspections were redundant. His military-issued multiscanner might be better than the civilian models, but its size and power limitations prevented it from performing any deeper or more thorough scans.

"I guess I have to put my faith in the existing arrangements."

Ves was about to have a sensitive discussion with a notorious expert pilot killer. It may have been one thing to slay an expert pilot in battle. It was another thing entirely if an expert died by someone from their own side for 'academic' purposes.

He silently grumbled at the Skull Architect's audacity. If he really wanted to butcher an expert pilot or three, he should have been more patient. The best choice would be to arrange the kidnapping of an expert pilot from the Hexadric Hegemony, the Friday Coalition's hated rivals.

If that wasn't possible, then the weak third-rate states surrounding their territories also had a bunch of expert pilots to spare.

"Though, if that really happened, the MTA will get pissed even more."

Every elite pilot who advanced to expert or higher automatically received protection from the MTA. Wholesale assassination or coercion on these privileged classes always provoked the ire of the Mech Trade Association.

"The Skull Architect was doomed either way."

Chapter 658 Tzianti Call

Once Ves gave up trying to discover any loopholes to this comm arrangement, he stepped inside a chamber immediately next to the one that held the giant Tzianti crystal. Ignoring its beautiful facets and cut, Ves instead directed his gaze towards the much less impressive looking hardware console.

"The interface is made as simple and basic as possible." The clerk explained with the tone of a practiced spiel. "Old technology is used whenever possible, making it extremely obvious if anything untoward is added to the machinery. You can consult the technical diagrams marked on the wall over there if you want to double-check the guts of the console."

"Do I have to pay more K-coins for that?"

"No. It is already covered by the previous fee you paid."

"Then don't mind if I do."

Though Ves felt tempted to skip the troublesome chore, he fought back his complacency and diligently scanned the entire interface. The low-tech communication device only had one goal, and that was to translate the input and output pouring through the enclosed cable connected to the heart of the Tzianti crystal.

This meant that the Tzianti crystal did all the heavy lifting of establishing real-time communication across many light-years. The hardware interface acted like a translator that processed the signals emanated by the crystal and converted them into a visual and auditory projection.

A mere projection hardly required the latest tech. By building the interface with the oldest and most reliable technical standards, Ves found it easy to understand the entire machine. It virtually possessed no depth at all!

Everything about the primitive arrangement was completely standard, but despite his expectations, Ves found nothing out of place.

Well, he wasn't exactly being forthright with that. While he may not have discovered anything amiss, his multiscanner did find traces of that a microscopic patch of something had been affixed next to the processors responsible for amplifying the Tzianti crystal's raw input.

According to his multiscanner, this incredibly tiny bug had been dissolved into trace elements mere minutes since he first arrived in this chamber. The only reason his scanner detected these traces was because it was a several months-old copy of the latest model of multiscanners from the Mech Corps.

His mouth curled into a minute grimace. If Ves hadn't been paranoid enough to make a detailed inspection, the comm center wouldn't have wiped out this irregularity. A third party would have been able to listen to his dirty dealings with the Skull Architect.

Ves really wanted to activate his jamming device right now, but he left it hanging on his toolbelt. Not only would the interference block the primitive and non sufficient shielded consoles, but the rules also prohibited the activation of a whole laundry list of devices.

He tried hard to withhold his anger. His logic and his desires dictated that he really did not want to cause any trouble. That might spark a conflict with the Bosey Clan, and pissing off the rulers of the space station meant the Vandals and the Swordmaidens might encounter resistance in their attempts at procuring some last-minute supplies.

"I'm satisfied with these arrangements." He finally declared, showing no hint that he observed any aborted mischief.

The clerk made a theatrical bow in front of Ves. "Then I leave you to your private session. Have a good day."

Both the clerk and his guards stepped outside the chamber. After Ves performed one last expedited sweep, he became confident that the chambers contained no more unexpected surprises, at least without bringing in a massive man-sized scanner normally used to identify traces of damage through a mech's exterior.

"There's no way I can delay this any further."

A creeping dread crawled up his back as he faced the console which had already loaded in the communication protocols by the clerk. Only a single press of a button awaited his impending conversation with one of the upper-level figures of the Faris Star Region.

Ves created a strong impression of the Skull Architect in his mind. A Senior Mech Designer, a driven researcher, an ambitious explorer, a strong-willed fugitive, a perfectionist in pursuit of efficiency, a cunning trapper, an impatient

madman, what else could he add to the complex sides of the man that managed to survive and thrive in the lawless frontier?

The more he dove into the Skull Architect's story, the more Ves became sympathetic to his cause and drive. Though Ves tried hard to steel his mind and resist this mental contamination, he hadn't entirely succeeded, considering the direction of his recent thoughts.

His disgust at the criminal mech designer's misdeeds became less severe. His sympathy for the man's largely fruitless attempt to impose an impossible level of efficiency in his designs caused Ves to contemplate giving out a hint or two about the X-Factor.

"What am I thinking?!" He shook his head. "These thoughts are dangerous!"

He refocused his mentality and tried to regain clarity in his mind. This was really hard because Ves identified strongly with the Skull Architect. They shared so many traits in common that Ves saw his future self with the older man!

"The design philosophy I'm forming is too radical. Nothing can hide forever. Once I inevitably go public with it, the principles I'm espousing will undoubtedly clash against the sensibilities of the more conservative and heartless mech designers. Will I be driven out from civilized space as well? What if my discoveries and advancements are actively suppressed by my peers?"

This might be his eventual fate in the next couple of hundred years!

Ves snorted in admonishment to himself. "There are still differences! For one, if I am to attract opposition, it will be on the debate floor and on the mech market. The MTA won't send their Compliance Department against me anytime soon. The second difference is that Mr. Jimenez butchered

thousands of mech pilots, while the most I'll be guilty of is offending the sensibilities of close-minded mech designers."

Of course, if the naysaying mech designers started to become an actual threat to his life and career, then he wouldn't mind employing his shadow force against them...

"A shadow force won't come into being out of thin air." He chuckled to himself. "I'll have to secure access to stealth tech first. Obtaining the specifications for an ultracompact battery is also necessary if I want to kit myself and my men with high-powered gadgets."

The key to obtaining these scraps of knowledge was to set a bottom line. Ves reminded himself not to get caught up with the upcoming negotiation. It might take a very long while, but he was pretty certain he could exchange the desired knowledge via the System's Skills. The cost may be unbearably huge, but at least it offered him a viable alternative.

"Stealth tech can actually wait, but learning how to build ultracompact batteries is something which is immediately useful in my current situation."

His priorities should be to secure the latter first. After that, he could try to fish for the former, but if the price became too troublesome, Ves would rather try his luck with researching the stealth fragments or wait until the Mech Corps discharged him so he could return to using the System.

"I'm procrastinating." He uttered. "I can't keep pushing this call back. People are waiting outside the door and I've got other matters on my agenda."

He pressed the button.

A small hum rang through the larger chamber as the massive Tzianti crystal began to shake. It vibrated and also started to glow from within. The faint white glow looked as if the crystal had birthed a star.

The entire phenomenon slowly built up, and eventually reached its limit several minutes later. An invisible wave of something thrummed from the Tzianti crystal and washed over his body like the caress of a feather.

The console lit up. A projection came into view. Unlike the modern projectors that were ubiquitous in the entire galaxy, this one appeared much less life-like. The lag, noise and extremely limited bandwidth turned the projected image into something that resembled a vintage projection from the Age of Stars.

The man that appeared had dark hair just like Ves and looked to be in the prime of his forties. His sharp face and aristocratic demeanor looked down on Ves with a neutral and restrained set of eyes.

His years in exile in the Faris Star Region had marked him deeply. Gone were the clean clothes and the superbly tailored lab coat he routinely wore as a mech designer from the Vermeer Group. Instead, he wore a tight vacsuit surrounding with what appeared to be a pirate admiral's coat dyed in some dark purple shade. The bloody mathematical symbols adorning his coat added a maniacal quality, while the panels of armor interspersed over the garment added some hard armor to complement its unseen defensive measures.

Ves failed to spot a single symbol or mark alluding to skulls or bones among the Skull Architect's clothes. However, the projector happened to capture a pyramid made out of human skulls in the background! The entire pile of skulls seemed to have been stacked into this shape with care and precision.

A mech designer that stacked skulls in his free time was obviously not a normal human being!

Only now did Ves realize the magnitude of what had happened.

Reno Jimenez, the man that gained the mantle of the Skull Architect, the Senior Mech Designer that most people in the Komodo Star Sector thought had died or fled to the other half of the galaxy, accepted a live call from Ves.

For a moment, Ves didn't know what to say. He simulated this conversation many times in his mind, but seeing the notorious mech designer in a live transmission disrupted his rhythm from the start.

The Skull Architect suffered no such affliction. "You are the mech designer who Mayra referred to my doorstep. Mister.. Ves.. Larkinson?"

"Ah, that is correct, sir." Ves immediately adopted a humble tone, though he took care not to overdo his reverence. The last thing he wanted to do was to portray himself as a pushover. "I am honored that you've accepted my call."

The infamous mech designer sneered at Ves. "Honored, are you? Be careful of what you say, Mr. Larkinson. I do not tolerate lies, nor the lips from which they are uttered."

"I speak the truth! My admiration for your work is boundless! The ingenious Leiner Grey design you've sent me has given me endless inspiration." Ves swiftly replied. Political instincts that Ves had always been ignorant of came to life, urging him to stay on the Skull Architect's good side. His deferential stance clashed powerfully against his dashing appearance. "Regardless of the reasons why you've parted from civilized space, experiencing your design philosophy has enriched my perspective."

The Skull Architect's face loosened a bit. Maybe he bought it, maybe he didn't, but the praise spewing out of Ves at least decreased the tension in the air. "Interesting, boy. Master Olson has chosen an interesting apprentice. She's always the lucky one. I don't think she even realizes what a treasure she has picked up. Did you know we used to be colleagues? We even collaborated on a number of designs back in the day."

Ves widened his eyes. He should have made the connection sooner. Both of them hailed from the Vermeer Group of the Friday Coalition. A few decades

ago, the Skull Architect was a respectable Senior Mech Designer, and Carmin Olson shared the same rank.

"I wasn't aware, sir. Your record doesn't mention any mech designs with her name on it as a collaborator."

"Records lie." The pirate mech designer stated firmly. "You young ones are too reliant on the galactic net. Unless you've witnessed an event with your own two eyes, always be skeptical. The MTA only tracks public mech designs, which is accurate at your level, but becomes increasingly less reflective of reality once you advance. The best mechs are always designed behind closed doors."

"I see!"

Ves already knew that, but not to this extent. Nonetheless, he adopted a suitably surprised expression, as if this revelation was worth gold to him. For whatever reason, the Skull Architect's mood had swung to a teaching mode. This personality was infinitely better than any of the other possible options, so Ves was content to play the eager student to the generous teacher.

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Chapter 659 Intensive Questioning

Despite his appearance as some pirate princeling in dark and menacing armor, Ves acted like an eager pupil in front of the Skull Architect's sage advice. The man who pulled off the pirate look much better than many other mech designers had dropped his belligerent tone. For now.

"Boy, it is clear to me that you are unaccustomed to collaborate projects. Have you ever jointly designed a mech?"

"No, sir, not if you count out competition mechs designed in a matter of days or hours."

The Skull Architect scoffed on the other side of the low-quality comm channel. "Working together with other mech designers to design the best mechs your abilities can produce is a complicated song and dance. It takes trust and sincerity to design a mech that expresses multiple design philosophies without clashing against each other. Done well, and the end product can be the most rewarding mech design that has ever graced from your hands. Done poorly, and the design not only wasted your time, but might lead to a schism with your fellow designer."

"I shall take note of your warnings." Ves dutifully nodded, and he did mentally record the man's lessons. "I have not had the privilege of collaborating with another mech designer, but it is inevitably on my agenda."

"About that topic." The Skull Architect's face abruptly grinned. The man peered closer into the projector, magnifying his face and crowding out the skulls piled in the background. "We are kindred mech designers."

The statement along with the change in expression came out of the blue. Ves became floored for a few seconds. What did the Skull Architect mean by that? Ves stayed silent, allowing for the other mech designer to explain.

"Our ethos, our willingness to pursue the mysteries of reality, our insatiable curiosity for the unknown, are we not alike?!" The Skull Architect listed out with a cackle. "Haha! Every mech designer that approached me did so with ulterior motives. Fine! I like ambitious mech designers! Yet when they finally demonstrate their designs to me, they are utterly consumed by petty thoughts and personal gains. It is the same for you!"

"I.. ahh.."

"Do not deny it, you whelp!" The man growled at him, before abruptly switching back to a grin. "However, compared to those useless pieces of trash, you are from a cut above. Your design for the Leiner Grey has revealed much

to me. I can read you like an open book. I must say that the motives I've sensed from your design is close to the ideal that mech designers your age should strive for. I can sense your hunger to transform the entire mech industry! You yearn to prove yourself at the highest level, is that right?"

"That is true." Ves nodded modestly. Even though he already knew that the Skull Architect could read a lot from his work, he felt awfully exposed right now. "The design philosophy that I've been forming goes contrary to many established conventions."

The Skull Architect smirked at Ves. "Your design philosophy.. very interesting. I have sensed an unfathomable depth underneath the surface that even I can't understand. A mech designer at your stage shouldn't be thinking so ambitiously. Yet you do not appear to be someone who adheres to the rules if they become inconvenient. Dangerous. Very dangerous."

A chill ran through his spine as Ves noted the underlying warning. The importance of a mech designer's design philosophy could not be overstated. It was literally the core of their beliefs on how mechs should look like. A critical flaw in someone's design philosophy might irreparably ruin their design careers because the flaws doomed all of their designs.

"Collaborate projects are an essential part of a mech designer's development." The Senior continued, having switched back to teaching mode. "They reveal shortcomings through contrast. They polish the strength of our design philosophies through collisions. They can result in a mech design that is greater than what we are able to design on our own. Let us consider the work you have submitted to me. Compare your Leiner Grey to mine as it was originally envisioned. Which design is better?"

Ves thought a lot on this topic himself, both as a way to judge his disparity with the Senior Mech Designer and also as a way to process the puzzles in

his mind that had cropped up. The question of which design won over the other was actually a comparison between visions.

Senior Jimenez envisioned a landbound light skirmisher that stood head and shoulders above similar mech models in terms of performance. It had been designed to function as a high-powered killing machine that almost rivalled the power of custom mechs in the package of a standard product.

Right out of the box, the Leiner Grey had been designed to awe and overcome expectations. The ruinous demands put on the mech pilots be damned, this mech demanded the utmost in order to display its full potential!

"Your vision for your mech is.. extreme." He finally spoke when he saw that the Skull Architect was getting impatient. "It is not a direction which I'm inclined to take. While I like to pursue performance like any other mech designer, I believe the best mechs are those designed from a holistic perspective. A mech is not a closed system in itself. It is an ecosystem which includes the bare mech frame as well as the mech pilot and the support structure that services and repairs the mech. I design an ecosystem, not just a mech."

It was a convoluted way of saying that Ves looked beyond the technical and took note of demands outside this sphere.

The Skull Architect displayed no surprise at his answer. "Elaborate in your own words, please."

"A mech does not operate in isolation. Every movement, every attack, every tactical decision requires a human mind behind the controls. A mech can be defined as a large weapon platform that is largely directed by the human in its cockpit. To me, the mech pilot is an indispensable part of a mech, and should be taken into account from the start whenever I design my own mechs."

"That is an understandable perspective." The Skull Architect murmured. "A mech that is controlled by an AI or some other substitute is a bot. However, the fallacy that you are falling for is assuming you are able to model the reactions of a mech pilot. Your design is suffused by deep insights of a mech pilot's perspective. This can be a blessing, but it can also be a shackle. How can mechs seek to surpass their predecessors if they are not pushing the envelope!?"

The Skull Architect must have been referring to the Masteries that Ves had applied when putting his own spin on the Leiner Grey design. The first-hand insights of several mech pilots continued to exert its influence on almost every design choice.

Ves had no cause to doubt the wisdom gained from them. To hear the Skull Architect question their usefulness was insulting.

However, he also knew what the Skull Architect was trying to say. The man attempted to warn Ves that he might have become too smitten in his gains from his Mastery.

A mech pilot and a mech designer occupied two very different kinds of professions. A good mech pilot might not always be the best mech designer, and vica versa.

"I.. appreciate the inquiry. You have given me some food for thought." Ves eventually answered. "My conviction hasn't changed, though. We design mechs to supply the mech markets and serve the needs of mech pilots. Calibrating our designs to take into account our target market is a fundamental necessity."

"The mech market is not perfect!" The Skull Architect suddenly roared, fury suffusing his very expression! "It is a heavily-regulated puppet show where the mech manufacturers with the biggest pockets muscle out better designs

through abusing their superior market power! The overwhelming majority of the mech markets in the galaxy is dominated by the same trans-galactic enterprises that are virtually impregnable in the galactic center!"

To Ves' dismay, the man was just starting with his rant. "Your faith in the so-called mech market is wholly misplaced. You rely too much on the assumption that demand is fueled by humans who can be trusted to act rationally. That is a complete LIE! The market is OVERFLOWING with IDIOTS and IMBECILES who chase after the SHINIEST TOY instead of sound and proper products! The ugly TRUTH is that mech buyers have NO IDEA what they really WANT! If I had my way, each person who buys a mech ought to LEAVE THEIR PURCHASING DECISIONS TO A PREPROGRAMMED AI! THIS WILL ALWAYS RESULT IN THE MOST OPTIMAL AND MOST RATIONAL MECH SELECTION IN NINETY-NINE OUT OF A HUNDRED CASES!"

"THE SECOND FAULT YOU ARE OVERLOOKING IS THAT THE MECH MARKET IS MYOPIC IN SCOPE AND ALWAYS FAILS IN PREDICTING FUTURE TRENDS! EARLIER I SAID THAT MECH MARKETS ARE POPULATED BY ORANG-UTANGS WHO DON'T KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A LIGHT SKIRMISHER AND A HEAVY ARTILLERY MECH. THIS GOES DOUBLE FOR NEW MECH TYPES AND RADICAL INNOVATIONS!"

"Ah, you haven't looked at the market that way, haven't you, boy? THEN OPEN YOUR EYES! Think about assassin mechs! Those stealthy mechs have long been dismissed in the early days because of their COMPLETE lack of armor and their PRIMITIVE implementation of stealth technology. Their stealth barely lasts a minute and they can't suppress alternative ways of spotting mechs such as gravitic sensors. HOWEVER, those who kept developing assassin mechs never gave up, and through the hard work and constant accumulation over several generations, they have FINALLY cracked the code and SUCCEEDED in developing principles to design VIABLE

STEALTH MECHS over the decades-long protests of the rest of the mech industry and the stupid consumers who think they know best!"

"The advantages these PIONEERS have built over many years of research and design work have PAID OFF for them in spades! Some of them have gained an immeasurable advantage in this field and they succeeded in transforming their HEADSTART into an ENDURING position of leadership!"

"However, for each success story, there are THOUSANDS if not MILLIONS of outright FAILURES. There are research directions that sound incredibly promising and ambitious, but NEVER see the light of day because their mech designers are INCOMPETENT. However, there are also mech designers who pursue a WORTHY GOAL that if successful, can transform the entire MECH LANDSCAPE! These brave souls require SUPPORT and INVESTMENT, not RIDICULE or PREMATURE CONDEMNATION! MANY GREAT IDEAS ARE SUPPRESSED BY CLOSE-MINDED IDIOTS, WHILE MANY AWFUL IDEAS RECEIVE ENTIRE SHIPMENTS OF MONEY BECAUSE THEIR MECH DESIGNERS ARE BORN WITH SILVER SPOONS IN THEIR MOUTHS!"

"That said, the latter is more of an exception than the rule, because by far the entire mech industry is a SNAIL in terms of innovation! There is no APPETITE for risk-taking and the DRIVE to design radically better mechs is ACTIVELY SUPPRESSED by the tyrannical know-it-alls of the MTA! COUNTLESS VIRTUALLY IDENTICAL MECH DESIGNS ARE PUBLISHED EACH YEAR, AND ALL OF THEM PERFORM NO BETTER THAN THEIR CLOSEST EQUIVALENT! THE FORCES OF INERTIA IS TOO STRONG IN THE MECH INDUSTRY, AND THE UNNECESSARILY HIGH STANDARDS OF VALIDATION BY THE MTA IS TO BLAME! BY RAISING THE QUALITY BAR TOO HIGH, THEY ARE ACTIVELY STRANGLING TOO MANY RADICAL NEW MECH CONCEPTS IN THEIR CRADLE BEFORE THEY CAN BE TESTED ON THE MARKET!"

"APPRENTICE MECH DESIGNER VES LARKINSON!"

Ves practically jumped out of his skin. "Y-Y-Yes, sir!?"

"Tell me," The man leaned closer to the sensor capturing his projection until his entire sneering face filled up the projection. "Do you still trust the sanctity of the mech market after hearing what I said?"

"I.."

The rant put Ves on the back foot. He barely followed the threads espoused by the Skull Architect as he vented his biases against the entities he developed grudges against. Ves had never cast his thoughts that deep, and to ask for his opinion immediately after hearing them for the first time was like asking him to design a complete production mech after his first day of attending his mech design classes!

Chapter 660 Human Behavior

Some much-needed clarity injected into his mind for a moment. Ves had been put out of his comfort zone after being on the receiving end of a passionate rant.

"Economists of all stripes can write entire virtual libraries on the subject of the mech industry and the mech market. I know what I am. I'm a mech designer. I know what I am not. I have not dived too deeply into questioning the model of the mech market in my mind."

"Is that your answer?" The Skull Architect scoffed in a disdainful manner. "You throw your hands in the air because matters of economy is beyond your scope of expertise? While I have a low opinion of the mech market, they set the rules that mech designers such as you must follow! For better or worse, every independent mech designer that has the power to publish their own designs must conform to market standard, however stifling they turn out to be! Doesn't that rankle you?!"

The man's response gave Ves some much-needed time to formulate a response. While he could have bopped his head and agreed with whatever the wise and mighty Senior said, Ves wanted to preserve his own ideas.

If he let the Skull Architect roll over him, Ves might as well convert to the gospel of the Skull Architect!

Ves calmed his mood and disregarded the other mech designer's high-strung mood. "Let me turn this argument around, if I may. You say that the mech market is made up of conservative copycat mech designers and buyers that are anything but rational. Does that not make the two of us fallible as well? Who are we to tell that we know what is best for mech pilots?"

"That argument may hold some weight if the number of suppliers of mechs is only limited to a handful of mech manufacturers. That is the EXACT opposite of the current market supply! There are so many mech designers attempting to make their mark on the mech market that it is straining the MTA's practically unlimited resources! Hahaha! Serves them right! Those control freaks are being brought down by the weight of their own success!"

The Skull Architect's grievances against the Mech Trade Association must run very deep. Hardly any mech designer dared to say anything ill about one of the two most powerful organizations in human space. Though the MTA presented a friendly and accessible face to the public, Ves heard they were rather firm in keeping the industry under their 'benevolent' supervision.

"My experiences with the Mech Trade Association have been shallow so far." Ves cautiously said. "I cannot say my experiences with them have ended on a bad note."

"You're still a cub in their eyes, Mr. Larkinson. You still need to jump out of the spawning pond before the MTA will start to take you seriously. When you reach Journeyman, their scrutiny on you will intensify by a thousand fold.

While the stereotype describes them watching over every mech designer through spy bugs and other high tech means, the real snake is hidden among your employees and associates. Do not trust a single of your man no matter how well you've secured their guarantees. ESPECIALLY do not trust the supposed ironclad contracts of the MTA to enforce non-disclosure agreements!"

"This.." Ves turned speechless for a moment. The idea sounded absurd, yet awfully plausible! "The MTA.. actively violates the confidentiality agreements they are supposed to uphold? This.. they are their own judge! There's nobody in the galaxy that is accountable to the MTA!"

The Skull Architect cackled as if he achieved a victory. "Haha! That's it! There's the rub! Too many mech designers have fallen into their trap of placing total confidence in their integrity and impartiality! The MTA is anything but a sober and united institution. It suffers from the same infighting, nepotism, corruption, incompetence and bias as every other organization ran by humans! As long as humans are involved, the WORST CASE SCENARIO will ALWAYS take place without fail! IT IS IN OUR NATURE TO SCREW UP!"

Ves read the underlying argument. The Skull Architect evidently held a deeper grievance against humans in general. In particular, their irrational and emotional behavior hampered his own research ventures many times.

Still, Ves did not agree with that sentiment. "Humans are fallible, yes. But we are also the race that have managed to conquer half the galaxy during the Age of Conquests. Our many screwups aside, our breadth of life and our wealth of emotions has driven us to greater heights than almost any alien before us has achieved! Although I respect your opinions, I really can't agree with your pessimism with regards to the imperfections of human behavior! Life is inherently dynamic, and while that makes our society imperfect, it's at least better than living like bots!"

His words expressed his beliefs that human diversity of thought and preferences could be a boon for mech designers. After all, if humans always chose to purchase the 'best' mechs on the market, wouldn't they exclusively purchase the optimized-to-death mass market models? Small-time craftsmen and up-and-coming mech designers such as Ves stood no chance of entering the market with his creative but suboptimal mech models.

His words had a measurable impact on the Skull Architect. The pirate mech designer scowled even more, but Ves knew the man's anger wasn't directed at him. The Senior couldn't refute Ves, not without sounding as if humans would be better off if they all turned into emotionless bots.

"Be that as it may, boy, the Mech Trade Association should have been held to a higher standard." Jimenez calmed down. "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Who watches the watchers? The MTA and CFA were initially conceived to split their powers and keep each other in check. Instead, they have decided to treat their area of interests as their exclusive domain in exchange for not bothering each other. The MTA is a tyrant within the borders of human space, while the CFA gets to terrorize the frontier on a regular basis. The original balance of powers envisioned at the start of the Age of Mechs is broken, and the cracks have already started to show in this last century."

"I.. I wouldn't know, sir."

"Of course not, you're just a small Apprentice Mech Designer. In our perspective, you are still a child. No matter. You will be apprised of the true state of human civilization when you reach my rank. Let me impart you with a free tip. Once you advance to Journeyman, which you inevitably will, DO NOT participate in any of their initiatives. They are all TRAPS designed to pull you into their .

The way the Senior spoke started to grate on Ves. While he sensed that the Skull Architect genuinely wanted to help him out, the older mech designer actually tried to pursue his own interests.

The Skull Architect was a huge hypocrite. He was guilty of the same kind of political maneuvering and backbiting that they laid at the feet of the MTA. Ves grimaced a bit at the realization, but he felt no need to confront the very dangerous mech designer of his faults.

"I will take your warning into consideration." He spoke.

If the Skull Architect wanted to plant some doubt into Ves' mind, then he certainly succeeded. Ves could never look at the MTA in the same way again.

With that minor victory in his belt, the Skull Architect grinned and leaned back from the projection. He didn't appear so menacing now, though his garments reminded Ves that the man was more than just a mech designer. He was speaking to a powerful influence among the pirates.

"I misspoke." The man surprisingly admitted a fault. "At the beginning, I stated that we were kindred mech designers. It is clear now that our differences are larger than I have anticipated. Nonetheless, despite our divergent beliefs, we are of one mind when it comes to making progress in mech design. How far are you willing to go to climb up to the next level?"

That was a complicated question that might lead to the question whether Ves had the guts to kill in order to achieve his goals.

"I prefer to keep the damage to the minimum. I am perfectly willing to be flexible if that gets me closer to my goals, but the most important priority is for me to stay alive. I can't do that very easily if I challenge the MTA."

The Senior smiled at him. "I don't expect you to. Not when you haven't experienced how stifling the MTA can be with regards to your research interests. Follow my earlier advice and keep the MTA as out of the loop as

possible. The less of a grasp they have on you, the longer you can advance your research without getting caught."

"Noted."

"Hmm.. enough about the MTA. You are still too indoctrinated into worshipping the ground it walks on. It will be difficult for you to recognize the ugly truth when you have not yet touched upon its rotten core."

The man turned around for a moment and rummaged through his pirate admiral's outfit. He drew out a data chip and inserted it into his interface. The low-quality projector split up, showing both the Skull Architect's face and a pair of identical designs.

"Let's discuss your test, shall we?" He began, and pressed a button that highlighted the differences between the mechs. "It is interesting that our Leiner Greys differ remarkably in performance and piloting ease. Where my design excels in the former, yours focuses on the latter. From a technical perspective, the divergence rate between our designs is less than two percent. Yet the impact these differences have on performance is more than fifteen percent! As for the jumps in piloting ease, since this is a subjective criteria, it can't be measured in exact terms, but I estimate that the difference in that aspect alone is over two-hundred percent!"

Ves did not look too surprised at those dramatic figures. As he designed the Leiner Grey Simplified Edition, he always compared it to the Leiner Grey Original Edition in his mind, or at least what these dumbed-down set of designs could achieve.

"The drop in performance is regrettable, but if the piloting experience is at least three times better than before, then I believe this trade-off is more than worth it. My design philosophy cares more about accommodating mech pilots than squeezing the last drops of performance."

The Skull Architect tutted at Ves in disapproval. The man had switched back to teaching mode. "Your casual disregard on the priority to maximize the performance of your mech is one of the most egregious flaws in your mech design. How naive! The notion that you can coast through your career designing artful, ergonomic but ultimately useless trinkets is a reckless one. Wake up! If you had to present your variant of the Leiner Grey before a council of Senior Mech Designers, they would laugh at you in the face before booting you from the hall and from their minds!"

"Performance is relative, sir. The Leiner Grey performs fifteen percent weaker than yours, that can't be argued with, but the potential mech pilots that can actual make use of it is multiplied by at least a thousand times! Usability and practicality are important qualities on their own, and should be taken into consideration as well when deciding what constitutes 'good performance'!"

The older man scoffed for the umpteenth time. Much of what Ves espoused seemed to rub him the wrong way. "Ah, the old 'everything is relevant' argument. Well, I when you bring your 'relatively good performing' mech models to the market, we shall see whether the mech market you place so much affection on possesses any appetite for your products when there are thousands of competing mech models that perform significantly better."

"I'd like to remind you that I am still at the early stages of my career. My mech designs can never match the performance of mainstream mech models and those designed by talented Seniors and Masters. Struggling to compete on them in terms of hard performance numbers is an exercise in folly."

"It is never too early to start chasing after the best! Back when I was your age, I was already dreaming of beating those seemingly perfect mainstream mech models that you so dread competing against. Certainly, many of my early products were failures! But I persisted, and persisted, until I finally broke through to Journeyman and published a respectable mech design that has

closed the gap by an enormous margin! These experiences have shaped my design philosophy into a long and sharp spear that I can use to drive directly into my impregnable competitors!"

The Skull Architect confirmed the speculation once a Journeyman formulated a design philosophy, it affected the remainder of that mech designer's career!

"As an Apprentice, your philosophy is still malleable and can be shaped into a different form. Think very hard before you decide on its final shape. The progress you make today will save you years of stagnation in the future!"