

### **Chapter 1241 Caskar Pike**

Ves materialized his System comm from his Inventory and activated his Privacy Shield before he picked up the cube.

He studied it for a moment before realizing that it was actually an engineering puzzle. Ves retrieved his Vulcaneye multiscanner from his toolbelt and thoroughly scanned the cube.

"I was right! It's a lock!"

The cube was made out of extremely sensor-resistant materials. The fact that it managed to thwart the scans of the multiscanner he bought from the System spoke volumes about its quality.

"This is very expensive packaging!"

If Ves could melt it down and shape it into something else, then he could repurpose the alloy cube into a more useful object.

"However, it's not that easy to do so."

If his guess was correct, the cube was rigged to melt or blow up if Ves handled it improperly. If he wanted to open the cube, then he needed to go along with the arrangements of its maker and solve the puzzle.

Although the puzzle would have stumped the vast majority of humans and AIs, it didn't hinder Ves for long.

"Any decent Journeyman Mech Designer can solve this puzzle."

The mechanisms of the cube essentially presented him with a design challenge. He needed to rearrange its mechanisms into a specific configuration that disarmed the trap and unlocked its contents.

"Easy." He said as he put the final piece into place with the help of a precision tool.

The box began to whirr and transform as the locks slowly disengaged. A few seconds later, the box unfolded into a flat surface.

The contents of the box turned out to be a single secure data chip.

When Ves picked it up and inserted it into a slot in his System comm, he found out that it contained three different sets of files along with a prerecorded message.

Ves played the prerecorded message first. As soon as he selected this option, a projection of one of the most notorious Senior Mech Designers in the frontier appeared into view.

"Mr. Larkinson, congratulations on your advancement to Journeyman." The pirate designer began. "I must admit I am pleasantly surprised by this achievement. As a Journeyman, I've already seen some promise in your design philosophy, but it is still a very big question whether you are able to advance to Journeyman with such an unusual ambition. Entering your new rank signifies that your design philosophy is not completely groundless!"

The Skull Architect looked ecstatic in the projection. His exaggerated smile and his savage pirate-style adornments constantly radiated danger to Ves!

"Your growth has surpassed my expectations! However, even if you are a Journeyman, our deal is still in place. I won't let you off until you design fifteen variants of my mechs! Included in this data chip are the design specifications of three of my recent mech designs. Please develop a variant for each design. Make sure you incorporate your design philosophy in your work. The research value of such works is exceedingly valuable to me, so don't even think about fudging your work!"

"Damn." Ves quietly cursed.

Due to his recent exploits, Ves already became known for designing mechs with a remarkable impact on people. To paraphrase Ketis, his mechs possessed an undeniably strong charm.

If Ves put his full effort into developing variants of the Skull Architect's existing mech designs, then they might one day proliferate throughout the frontier!

It would be really bad if the MTA or others found out that Ves collaborated with a pirate designer! Especially one who was crazy enough to kill an expert pilot and incorporate the dead man's skull into a mech!

The Skull Architect continued with his instruction. "Since you've already collaborated with another Senior Mech Designer recently, you should have a good idea on how you can contribute to my work. Our design philosophies do not overlap, so you should not encounter any problems adding your distinctive strengths to my existing designs."

That was true, at least. His joint design project with Professor Ventag taught him a lot of lessons. A collaboration between mech designers always centered around compensating one designer's weaknesses with another designer's strength.

Ves already knew that the Skull Architect was obsessed with efficiency and technical performance. His design philosophy was pretty much the polar opposite to that of Ves, who never obsessed that much about maximizing raw performance.

This was also the reason why Reno Jimenez stagnated in his progression. His mechs were too difficult to pilot! While the fugitive Senior was very good at designing high-performing mechs, hardly any mech pilot could make use of their full potential!

Even though the Skull Architect recognized his shortcomings, he was too obsessed with efficiency to change his ways. His design philosophy had

already locked him into a certain direction, and there was no way he could bring himself to neuter his designs in order to accommodate the badly-trained mech pilots of the frontier!

This was where Ves came in. His design philosophy perfectly complimented that of the Skull Architect. If the latter wasn't a notoriously unhinged pirate designer, then Ves was even tempted to form a long-term design partnership!

"I expect you to return this data chip with your variants to me within nine months. Don't be late, or else!" The recording warned.

The message ended, leaving Ves with mixed feelings.

"Since the Skull Architect is crazy as hell, I should complete my end of agreement as fast as possible." He decided. "The longer this is hanging over my head, the greater the risk he'll pull me into his vortex!"

Collaboration offered a lot of benefits in the right circumstances. Ves realized that his design philosophy should be extremely valuable to the Skull Architect.

So valuable in fact that the Skull Architect might want to extend their transaction!

"I can't allow that to happen!" Ves determined.

Even though the Senior threatened him to do his best, Ves did not intend to utilize his full strength!

"It would be over for me if the variants I design for the Skull Architect are as strong and distinctive as my Aurora Titan and Transcendent Messenger designs!"

After a few minutes of consideration, Ves decided to aim for a modest C-grade X-Factor when he fulfilled the Skull Architect's demands. C-grade X-Factor should be strong enough to exert a modest amount of influence to

mech pilots, but wouldn't flaunt its aura so blatantly like his most recent designs.

"It does the job. That's all that matters."

Of course, the Skull Architect expected Ves to contribute more than that to his high-performance designs. Ves also had to adjust the technical aspects of the design in a way that made them easier to pilot without sacrificing too much performance.

"This will be the most difficult and time-consuming part of my assignment." Ves muttered.

If he was still an Apprentice, then Ves would probably have to allocate much of his time to develop a variant that added value to one of the Skull Architect's designs.

Now, Ves possessed a lot more confidence in his abilities. With the help of his design seed, he didn't think he would have to close himself off all-day in order to finish his work within the nine-month time limit.

"It's a good thing I don't have any ongoing design projects on the agenda. Even if I do, I can just squeeze some time on this assignment in my free time."

Once Ves determined his basic approach, he began to inspect the three designs that the Skull Architect expected him to improve.

"Hm. One landbound mech design and two spaceborn mech designs."

In general, pirates heavily depended on spaceborn mechs. Many pirate gangs didn't even field any landbound mechs in the first place. They were not as applicable in the frontier as in civilized space.

This was also why Lydia's Swordmaidens were special, as they invested significantly in their landbound mech contingent.

After he skimmed through the three design schematics, Ves decided to start with what he considered to be the simplest choice.

"Although the Caskar Pike looks simple, it's really not." Ves shook his head.  
"None of the Skull Architect's designs are simple."

The Caskar Pike was a medium spaceborn missileer. Its primary armament consisted of its large, integrated missile launcher system, which encompassed much of its torso and shoulders.

This turned the mech into a rather unwieldy machine. Combined with its abysmally weak armor system, the mech was extraordinarily vulnerable to close-ranged attacks.

A single light skirmisher could make mincemeat out of a Caskar Pike!

Evidently, the Skull Architect wasn't resigned to designing such a one-dimensional mech. He attempted to enhance the Caskar Pike design by pairing it with an extremely powerful flight system that boosted its acceleration and speed.

While this addition indeed increased the mobility of the Caskar Pike, the missileer became a lot more clunkier to pilot! All the compromises the Skull Architect was forced to make in order to accommodate the oversized flight system introduced a lot of problems.

"A skilled mech pilot should be able to manage the missile launcher system while dodging enemy fire and pursuit."

While missile weapon systems were constrained by their capacity, they offered the greatest amount of versatility compared to more straightforward weapons such as laser rifles and ballistic rifles.

Mech pilots adjusted the programming of the missiles loaded into the launcher system according to the situation at hand.

For example, the payload could be programmed to time their salvos to arrive at the target at the exact same time. The missiles could be programmed to fan out and arc around the target in order to attack it in multiple directions. Their evasion pattern and countermeasures could be adjusted as well in order to minimize their interception.

While some settings didn't take much time to adjust, such simple instructions didn't add much versatility to the missiles.

The more complicated instructions took a decent amount of time to implement. While a mech pilot would be able to accomplish this at rest, during a hectic a mech pilot was constantly expected to multitask.

Piloting a mech with enhanced mobility like the Caskar Pike meant that its mech pilots needed to devote way too much attention to keeping the flight of their mechs under control. This detracted from the amount of attention they could devote to configuring the missile launcher system.

As a result, the Caskar Pike underperformed in the frontier. From the additional documentation that the Skull Architect added to the data chip, Ves found out that the pirates who piloted the Caskar Pike displayed sufficient mobility but grossly inadequate hit rates.

Either their opponents intercepted too many missiles, or the missiles missed the mark!

"That's because the pirate pilots aren't capable of devoting their full attention to both!"

The mech pilots of the Caskar Pike had to make a choice. Either they devoted the bulk of their attention to keeping their mech mobile or ensuring that their missiles inflicted damage.

The pirates overwhelmingly focused on staying elusive and dodging enemy fire. This was because they valued their lives over the mission!

Ever since many mech pilots exhibited the same pattern of behavior, the Caskar Pike thoroughly lost popularity. Although it offered a powerful and affordable offensive package to frontier outfits, its design hadn't taken the mentality of its target audience in mind!

"This seems to be a recurring problem to the Skull Architect." Ves judged.

Although this problem sounded somewhat thorny, Ves was confident he could lighten the burden on the mech pilot. He considered this design to be the simplest out of the three designs he received.

"There's not much I can improve on the hardware of the Caskar Pike." He muttered as he analyzed its design schematics. "If I want to make the mech easier to pilot, I'll have to focus on its interaction to its mech pilots."

In other words, Ves could simplify the operation of the mech by automating some of its functions. This was fairly simple and only required him to do some programming work.

"Yet.. isn't that too easy?" He frowned.

There must be something special about the Caskar Pike. Maybe the Skull Architect wanted to offer Ves an easy start, but this was unlikely considering the Senior's extremely demanding personality.

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Everything he has given to me so far is either a test or a trap. There's definitely something fishy about this spaceborn missileer mech."

#### **Chapter 1242 Spiritual Plunder**

Ves had the impression that the Caskar Pike design was a wolf in sheep's clothing. It adopted a simple mech concept, but it probably hid a lot more nuances under its hood.

For this reason, Ves spent an entire hour studying the design schematics in greater detail.



In the past, whenever Ves attempted to study the work of a high-ranking mech designer, he faced a significant amount of danger. When he was an Apprentice, his design philosophy was still in a nascent state, which meant it was highly malleable.

While this malleability allowed Ves to constantly adjust and improve his design philosophy, it also made it vulnerable to outside influence!

Before, the Skull Architect deliberately tortured Ves by exposing him to designs and information that threatened his design philosophy.

If Ves did not possess a stronger-than-average Spirituality, then he might have succumbed to outside influence.

"Fortunately, that didn't happen."

He knew his limits and properly paced his information intake.

Now that Ves once again came in touch with the Skull Architect's work, he found that he didn't have to bother with those precautions anymore.

His design seed solidified his design philosophy, making it much more resistant against outside influence. While that didn't guarantee that Ves was immune to very strong attacks against his design philosophy, at the very least he could face the work of a Senior without fearing contamination.

"No wonder the Skull Architect placed higher expectations on me. He knows exactly how much better my design abilities have become now that I'm a Journeyman."

Even though he was no longer an Apprentice, Ves still failed to figure out the secret behind the Caskar Pike. He spent a lot of time in trying to study the abstruse portions of the spaceborn missileer's design, but other than enduring a moderate amount of strain, he did not notice anything problematic.

Ves set aside the design. "I have plenty of time to tackle this problem. Right now, I've just returned. I'm in no mood to work on a mech design right now."

He stowed away the data chip into his toolbelt before returning his System comm back into his Inventory.

"What a convenient function." He sighed in admiration. "It should have come with this ability from the start."

Once he returned everything to normal and tidied up his desk, Ves nursed his head for a moment.

"Ugh. I'm still suffering from my earlier loss."

The main reason why he wasn't in a mood to work on a mech design was because of his depleted spiritual energy. He expended way too much of his reserves when he attempted to fuse his mind with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment and supercharged its aura.

Although his mind would eventually replenish what he lost, Ves expected that it would take months for his spiritual energy levels to return to its former glory.

Now, Ves constantly suffered from the illusion that his mind was empty.

Although he could still work on a mech design, he couldn't summon any of his usual passion and vigor towards his craft.

"It's like I'm suffering from the mech designer's equivalent of a writer's block!"

Although Ves did not have any ongoing design projects on his plate right now, he did not wish to remain in this listless state while he tackled the Skull Architect's designs.

"I need to recharge my tank somehow. There should be a way to accelerate my recovery."

Ves folded his fingers into each other as he considered how he could accomplish something unheard of like this. He knew that spiritual energy was quite valuable and hard to come by.

His excursions into the imaginary realm and his exposure to the holy relics of the Ylvaine Protectorate provided him with two possible avenues to plunder spiritual energy.

"Yet it's never simple as that."

Spiritual energy came in many different attributes. Ves didn't know what his own attribute was, but it was probably related to mechs.

Ves had no way of knowing if his spiritual energy encompassed mechs in their entirety or a specific type of mechs. Perhaps his spiritual energy attribute was wholly unique to his mind and his design philosophy.

If this was the case, then it was impossible for Ves to replenish his spiritual energy from other sources without converting their attributes.

Not even Qilanxo's spiritual fragment attempted this conversion process! This showcased how difficult it was to accomplish such a thing!

In any case, Ves did not even know if it was safe or wise to resort to external sources in the first place. While he witnessed the likes of Eloise Pelican and Jannzi Larkinson breaking past their limits with the help of an external boost, the side effects were quite severe!

At least in the case of Jannzi, her mindscape had been forcefully expanded to the point where some holes opened up that caused her to leak out her force of will!

Right now, Ves didn't know how much she recovered during the months she advanced to expert candidate. Because of her enlistment into the Apocalypse Heralds, Ves couldn't call her up or request her current status.

"Well, I haven't received any alarming notifications so her recovery is probably going smoothly."

Considering that Jannzi was likely okay, Ves figured that it was an acceptable risk for him to supplement his spiritual energy with an external source

The question was where he should get it. The most straightforward source would be to plunder the mind of another mech designer, but Ves had attempted it before. What if his target found out? What if he encountered fierce defenses?

"I shouldn't underestimate mech designers. They're equivalent to expert pilots."

While they were completely different in many ways, on a spiritual level they possessed an equivalent amount of strength. It was just that their professions caused them to diverge in their application of spirituality.

On a basic level, a Journeyman like Ves possessed a very solid and concentrated design seed which was very difficult to crack. Surrounding that was a thin cloud of loose spiritual energy.

Ves was very short of the latter right now. Although it didn't appear to be as important as the design seed, their absence really hampered his enthusiasm to design a mech!

On the surface, this model indicated that it shouldn't be too difficult to steal some portions of this loose spiritual energy in the mind of another mech designer.

Yet Ves suspected that the mind of a mech designer will surely offer a lot of resistance.

The primary reason why he thought so was because he felt the design seed was a lot more complex than he thought. It was like a sleeping giant that mostly kept to itself but roused when something intruded into its domain.

"Maybe I should take the safer option instead."

Rather than intruding in the mind of a mech designer, Ves would rather plunder an inanimate source instead.

Yet that brought forth its own issues. Where could he find the equivalent of a holy relic that incited people to revere a mech designer instead of some holy figure?

After a bit of thinking, Ves suddenly made an important realization.

"This is the Age of Mechs! Most people today worship mechs!"

Ves thought back to when he visited the mech museums and exhibition halls in Bentheim. The noteworthy mechs on display in these prestigious venues attracted billions of visitors every year!

Even if the visitors were predominantly Brighters who didn't believe in a higher existence, they were still very religious when it came to mechs!

"Some mechs inspire their own worship! They're that amazing!"

What was even better was that Ves happened to excel in this area! Each new mech grew stronger and stronger in their ability to inspire worship and admiration from the public. While this effect had grown to the point of attracting a lot of scrutiny and suspicion, it was undeniable that Ves would have no difficulty in attracting countless worshippers!

"Pff!" Ves suddenly shook his head. "Why am I suddenly imagining myself as a cult leader?!"

It took hundreds of years for devout Ylvainans to build up a significant amount of spiritual accumulation to a holy relic that was tied to the great prophet himself.

Ves could not expect any of his mechs, including the copies of his astounding Aurora Titan and Transcendent Messenger designs, to match this degree of accumulation in a couple of months or years.

Most people did not possess anything but a microscopic amount of spirituality, and only a fraction of that passed on to the object they worshipped.

This meant that Ves could not rely on his own mechs to plunder their spiritual accumulation to replenish his own shortfall.

"Still, knowing this is useful for the long term."

For now, Ves would have to rely on older mechs designed by other mech designers as a potential source of replenishment.

There were plenty of impressive and historically-significant mechs on display throughout human space. Ves merely had to take a trip to Bentheim to view hundreds of them. Yet did their spiritual accumulation really match his own attribute?

"I don't have enough information. I can only try and see if it works."

Ves decided to plan a trip to Bentheim after he celebrated his birthday on Cloudy Curtain. It would be his first stop to the Centerpoint System which was home to the sector headquarters of the MTA.

For now, Ves set aside any further speculation. He had worked long enough and didn't enjoy a single rest since he returned to Cloudy Curtain.

Once he took a good night's rest, he woke up the next morning and felt a bit more refreshed.

Leland, who had kept his head down throughout the entire business trip, suddenly requested a meeting with Ves in the morning.

They met in his office.

"Leland." Ves said with a mild tone of voice. "What can I do for my favorite spy?"

While Leland hadn't particularly made himself useful during their stay on Kesseling VIII, that was mostly because Flashlight held little sway there.

Now that they returned to the Bright Republic, Leland possessed a much more confident air around him. This was his old stomping ground!

Leland activated his signal jammer.

"I've reported back to Flashlight on the events that took place on Kesseling VIII. They've already been following the news reports from the Protectorate, so they have a good idea on what has happened."

"Of course." Ves pressed his lips in a thin smile. "What do they want? If they expect me to take over the Ylvaine Protectorate by abusing my status as the Bright Martyr, then they should really get their heads checked."

"We do not harbor any such intentions." Leland innocently replied. "We merely believe it may further both our interests if you keep developing a close relationship with the Ylvaine Protectorate. As you know, the Bright Republic always ignored this state in favor of concentrating most of our attention to the hostile Vesians."

Ves nodded. "Now, that's in the process of changing. The Ylvaine Protectorate is slowly opening itself up to the rest of the galaxy, and as its neighbor the Bright Republic can ill afford to ignore them any longer."

"I'm glad you understand, Ves. Considering your unique connection to the Protectorate, we would like you to continue to cultivate your ties to the state

and especially Madame Cecily Curin. She's a remarkably friendly and open-minded Ylvainan. Flashlight believes that she can be an invaluable partner for our attempts to cultivate a positive relationship between our two states."

"I think you shouldn't focus too much on Madame Cecily." Ves tried to suppress the ridicule threatening to engulf his face. "Neither of us are diplomats. We're merely business partners."

"Fostering greater trade between our two states is a high priority to the Bright Republic. I'm sure you can assist us in facilitating larger business deals through your connection with Madame Cecily. Her jurisdiction covers the entire Ylvainan mech market, after all."

Leland's insistence on this matter told Ves that Flashlight and the government cared a lot about this. Perhaps the Tovars directly issued instructions on this matter.

"Let's just say I'll do what I can, but don't expect much of me. You're better off approaching the the Ylvaine Protectly directly than rely on a backdoor." Ves sighed in exasperation.

He was just a mech designer. Since when did he turn into a diplomat and a dealmaker?

### **Chapter 1243 Big Girl**

Ves really couldn't be bothered with facilitating relations between the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate.

After receiving Leland's request, Ves handed it over to Calsie and told her to take care of it in his stead.

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs wants to use us as a bridge to build up relations between our two states. Just do enough to keep them happy."



After taking care of that matter, Ves addressed some other matters as well. One of the most important one was to pay a visit to the base of the Avatars of Myth in order to meet with Coyin Larkinson, a retired infantryman.

The man looked as if he was getting on in his years. Despite his age, he still possessed a tough and fit body.

"So you're the brat who needs my services, right?" Coyin asked when Ves entered the room with Melkor.

Ves did not look amused. He stared at the man and applied some pressure.

That caused Coyin's face to color a bit. The old man began to stand up straighter. "Looks like it's true. You do have some of the air of an expert pilot around you! As expected of the Devil Tongue!"

"Please don't mention that awful name." Ves said with a grimace.

"Why not? You should be proud of it! It shows that you're a fighter! Let it not be said that us Larkinsons are cowards!"

After talking a bit with Coyin, Ves quickly got his measure. He was typical to retired Larkinsons, always harping on about their past glory and how well they fought in the previous wars.

Aside from an intense hate for the Vesians, the old Larkinson seemed capable enough to lead the first guard infantry company of the Avatars of Myth. The man may be stody, but he knew his business and he possessed a lot of actual battle experience.

"Not every Larkinson who doesn't possess the right genetic aptitude wants to remain a civilian." Coyin said with his gruff voice. "Although guard duty and infantry combat isn't as exciting as piloting mech these days, they're just as essential. It's a noble calling."

"I'm not arguing with that." Ves said. "That's also why I need you to set up a guard force that is ready to guard me and other important people working at the LMC. Although I already have a very extensive security contract with Sanyal-Ablin, they aren't able to accompany me everywhere."

Coyin recognized the name. "SASS is really good. Expensive too, but good. However, I heard that the main reason why they're so spread around the Komodo Star Sector is because they extend the influence of the Konsu Clan of the Friday Coalition. Why go through the trouble of inserting spies and risking all kinds of trouble when you can just establish a security company and send them out openly as security experts?"

"I know that's a possibility. That's why I want the Avatars of Myth to slowly take over the responsibilities of SASS. Whether it's mechs, guard infantry or virtual security, I want the Avatars of Myth to offer the full gamut of all the services a regular security company offers."

This comprehensive list of demands caused both Melkor and Coyin to be taken aback.

Melkor shifted pensively on his feet. "That's a very serious effort, Ves. Covering virtual security is a whole other field. We'll have to set up a dedicated department just to provide the minimum level of protection."

"Take your time. For now, SASS is sufficient to cover this responsibility."

A mech company like the LMC constantly accumulated a lot of sensitive internal data. It would be bad if others managed to get access to them, but it was not that big of a deal.

The most valuable data was stored inside the heads of the mech designers of the company. This was also why Ves prioritized his personal safety before the safety of the LMC's databases.

Once he finished instructing Melkor on what he expected from the Avatars, Ves left the base and returned to headquarters. He tracked down Ketis and Lucky at the company's living area.

"You know, Ves, you should get a house or a villa like the ones we stayed at in the Protectorate." She said as she was eating a meal by the dining table.

Lucky was eating his lunch as well, as Ketis served him a bowl of low-grade exotics. The cat blissfully munched the minerals on the table.

"I thought you didn't care about homes, Ketis."

"I used to live on starships, so I never really saw the point of houses. It's different now that I don't necessarily have to sleep in the same place where I work. I think it would be nice to live in a place of my own perhaps. You got lots of money, right? Why not spend some of that to build a nice home?"

Now that she brought it up, Ves did indeed miss living in his own home. The last time he truly lived in a proper home was his father's house in Freslin.

He still owned the modest middle-class dwelling, but it was wholly inadequate for a mech designer of his stature. The security risks alone made it unsuitable for his use.

"You know what, you're right. I do need a new home. I think it's best to keep it close to the Mech Nursery for security reasons, but they don't need to be within sight of each other. Can you take care of it? Coordinate with Calsie or Gavin to help organize the construction of a new villa."

Ketis looked surprised. "Really? You're letting me take charge of the construction project?"

"I don't have the time nor interest to manage this project. It's just a home. Just make sure to prioritize safety. I've become very prominent lately, so you need to make sure that my accommodation is secure."

Just like before, Ves delegated a responsibility to someone else. Since Ves did not have any new design projects in store for the foreseeable future, he needed to keep Ketis busy somehow. Putting her in charge of constructing a new villa should occupy her for a couple of months.

"Now that you're here, there's something else I wanted to talk about, Ves. I want to start earning my own keep."

That sounded serious enough for Ves to pay full attention. "You sound very determined."

"I've been thinking about why I'm here, Ves. I've been enjoying your help and attention for a long time, but I've hardly paid you back for all the favors you've done."

"You are thinking about designing your own mech?" Ves guessed.

She nodded. "I think I'm ready to do something on my own. Even if it's designing a variant, I want to learn how to design a mech without your help. This is something I need."

"You're right. A mech designer ought to be able to design a mech by themselves." Ves agreed, though he felt very apprehensive about letting Ketis off on her own. "Are you sure you're up for the challenge?"

"I'm more than ready. The experience I've gained from helping you with the Aurora Titan and Transcendent Messenger designs is enough for me to manage my own approach."

She was ready. Ves could feel it. Now only did she overflow with passion and enthusiasm, she also prepared well.

However, even if her intentions were good, the time may not be right.

"Whatever mech you design won't sell well in the current market environment." He cautioned. "Not only is everyone waiting for the next mech

generation, a variant designed by a novice generally don't sell very well. Even if you make your mech so cheap that its product margin is razor thin, it won't have any impact on the mech market."

Ketis shrugged. "I know it's tough for Novices like me to get a start. Didn't you start small as well? You can't baby me forever, Ves! I have to advance so that I can develop my own superpower!"

"Not that again." Ves groaned. "I can't believe you still take that delusion seriously."

Her stubborn face showed that his argument didn't take hold. "I'll find out by myself when I advance to Journeyman. Until then, I need to have a lot more practice and design experience under my belt. Helping you out in your designs is great, but a girl has to stand up on her own sometimes, you know?"

"Is there anything else behind this decision?"

"Yeah. Remember the Swordmaidens? I got back in touch with them lately."

Ves looked interested. "How are they doing?"

"They took an awful beating. You know how bad it got at the end. The worst thing about it is that their backers only handed over a single lump sum of money for all of the stuff they did. Commander Dise thinks the Swordmaidens outlived their usefulness in their eyes."

"I would have thought that their backers would have appreciated your old outfit because it's led by an expert candidate."

Due to an extraordinary event on Aeon Corona VII, both Captain Orfan of the Flagrant Vandals and Commander Dise of what used to be Lydia's Swordmaidens advanced to expert candidates.

While this did not guarantee that they would be able to take the next step and advance to expert pilot, the possibility of it alone was very valuable! To Ves, a

single expert candidate was worth as much as the Swordmaidens in their prime!

"Commander Dise didn't tell our backers anything about her recent advancement. Most Swordmaidens who knew about it died on the planet. Aside from sharing her secret to the highest-ranking Swordmaidens, she's been keeping her improvement under wraps."

That sounded wise. Expert candidates were extremely attention-grabbing, especially in a depraved region like the frontier. If it became known that the Swordmaidens harbored an expert candidate, then the Dragon Alliance or the Ravienne Alliance would quickly come and 'invite' them to be a part of their pirate group.

"Still, it must be tough for the Swordmaidens to rebuild their strength after such a devastating loss."

"They're managing for now. It takes years to train up new Swordmaidens, so they're laying low." Ketis said. "The only issue that's becoming increasingly more pressing is that their bag of money will eventually run out. They will need some money in order to sustain their recovery, and they're looking at us to supplement their income."

Ves still remembered the deal he made with Commander Dise. "I'm willing to lend a hand, but not for free."

"I know. That's also why I want to design my own mechs. I don't have any use for the money. I might as well pass it onto the Swordmaidens."

This must be the main reason why Ketis wanted to strike out on her own. While Ves was still apprehensive whether her first design would be any good, at the very least she gained some very necessary experience.

He also thought about how to approach cases like this when his subordinate mech designers wanted to design their own mechs.

He began to explain his scheme. "If you happen to design a new mech, I can offer you several options upon finishing it. You can hand it over to me to uptune your design and elevate it to my standards. This is a lot of work, though. So in exchange for this service, you'll have to cede a proportionate amount of ownership of the design to me for fairness sake."

"I don't like this option. It sounds as if most of the effort I put into my designs is pointless since you're just going to override most of my design choices."

"The other option I can offer you is to publish your design under a different brand name. Your work will still belong to you, but it won't be associated with my main brand. Instead, I'll think up a different but related brand for designs that don't meet the LMC's quality standards."

The LMC built up a considerable amount of reputation, but that mostly rested on its quality designs. If the company started selling mechs designed by Novices all of a sudden, its reputation would quickly nosedive!

However, without the direct backing of the LMC, Ketis would have a tough time trying to sell her mechs. Even so, it sounded like a better prospect for her to develop herself.

"The mech market is a tough place, but I'm a big girl. I can handle myself." She confidently stated. "Just wait. In six months, I'll have my first variant ready. I already have a good idea on what I want to design."

"I'll look forward to your work."

#### **Chapter 1244 The New Larkinson Family**

Ves didn't forget about the gold label Aurora Titans he promised to fabricate. As soon as he caught up on his paperwork, he rushed their fabrication.

While he wasn't in his best state, it hardly affected the fabrication of mechs. Just thinking about how each gold label Aurora Titan sold for 150 million credits a piece was enough to motivate him into working faster.

Even if the quality of his work slipped a bit, the difference was within his tolerance. Ves really wanted to finish this commitment as fast as possible so he delayed his journey to Centerpoint System until he emptied out his backlog.

The only minor complication was that Ves needed to spend some time to design a customized look for each of the fifteen gold label Aurora Titans. With his current design ability, this wasn't a challenge, but he had to admit that he wasn't in the most inspired mood right now.

Working while he was in a spiritually-depleted state annoyed Ves a bit. He realized that he had become quite dependent on his Spirituality in order to perform at his best.

"It's not wrong to depend on inspiration, but I should really learn how to manage without it. A mech designer shouldn't be rendered helpless just because they're in a bad mood."

Ves treated Spirituality as a stimulant. He was addicted to it like Axelar used to be addicted to his formulas.

Just like the privileged Terran, Ves didn't want to stop his addiction.

"The difference between me and a junkie is that my addiction is productive."

He began to see the silver lining behind his suboptimal condition. As long as he could train himself to bear with this handicap, then his consistency would grow. No matter if he was in a good mood or a bad mood, he'd be able to put out consistently good work.

Just waiting for the times he was inspired or fired up was a rather unreliable way to approach his profession. While Ves was quite proficient in getting into the right mood, who knew if he failed one day?



Time began to pass as Ves seriously started to explore how he could cope with his work during his low periods.

While it wasn't easy, Ves persisted in it, knowing that he was dealing with his condition a bit better every day.

One area in which he didn't make any progress was his relationship with Lucky. The cat only allowed himself to be pampered by Ketis lately!

"Come on, Lucky. Who's your owner, me or Ketis?"

"Meow!" Lucky turned his head and flipped his tail.

"Don't you think you're being too excessive here? When will you finally forgive me for feeding you that nutrient pack wrapper?"

"MEOW!"

Lucky jumped from his perch and phased through the wall, leaving Ves behind.

"Damn." He muttered. "I better order a more expensive batch of exotics. He can't stay pissed at me forever."

During his off time, Melkor visited him to inform him of a major development.

"Do you remember when I told you that the Larkinsons plan to set up shop on Cloudy Curtain? Well, they've just started constructing a new compound in Freslin."

"I'm aware." Ves sighed. "I don't think it's necessary for them to build a second retreat here. I don't want to involve the family in the running of my business too much."

"Your importance and the importance of the LMC to the Larkinson Estate is way too significant for the rest of us to ignore. Even if you haven't attended any of the steering committee gatherings lately, your shadow still looms over

them. More and more Larkinsons believe that devoting the family solely to the Mech Corps is not enough anymore."

Ves knew he couldn't do anything to change this trend. The Larkinsons used to be satisfied with their lot because they didn't possess any exceptional entrepreneurs in the family. Now that a cash cow like him came along, the ambitions of the family finally found fertile ground to grow.

Expert pilots may be powerful, but their service to the Mech Corps meant that they didn't actually earn any money! It already cost the military billions of credits to develop and maintain an expert mech for each of them. The privilege of piloting an expensive mech that was tailored to their needs was pretty much the extent of their remuneration!

Mech designers faced different circumstances. Although they didn't enjoy as much privileges and protection, they could make all of that up on their own due to their ability to generate lots of revenue.

When Ves was still an Apprentice, the Larkinsons still held out their judgement on whether he'd be able to survive in the long-term. Now that he advanced to Journeyman Mech Designer, most of that uncertainty had been cleared away.

Not only would Ves be able to earn vastly more money, but he would definitely get to live long enough to provide steady shelter to the Larkinson Family for the next two centuries!

"There's more to this decision than providing a common home for all of the Larkinsons joining the LMC or the Avatars." Melkor continued. "Right now, the family is completely dependent on you to prop up the LMC. What happens if something happens to you? While the elders want you to find a girlfriend, they want backups in place in case something happens to you and your offspring."

It was never a good idea to put all of your eggs in one basket. Ves understood this point, so he could pretty much predict what Melkor tried to say.

"The family wants me to help raise more mech designers, right?"

"Yup. They know it's very hard to raise a proper mech designer who can survive in the business, so they've been combing through the younger generation of Larkinsons for promising seeds. They've already identified a few, and they've been putting some of the money they've gotten to good use by prepping them to study mech design."

Was it difficult to study mech design? Yes. Was it impossible, no. As long as someone with a decent degree of intelligence put enough time and dedication in their studies, they could gain a sufficient amount of mastery in the fundamental sciences required to design a mech from scratch.

Yet there was so much more to mech design than learning the sciences.

The top schools for mech design such as the Ansel University of Mech Design and the Dorum Center for Technology and Innovation went far beyond theory. They placed most of their emphasis on practical lessons. The ability to design depended a lot on both practice and proper guidance by teachers who knew what they were talking about.

It sounded like the Larkinson Family was aware of this difference.

"What does the family expect of me? Babysit a bunch of brats?"

"That's essentially what they want." Melkor confirmed. "It will take some time to finish the construction of the new compound and to arrange the relocation of the promising seeds and their families. Once everything is set up, the family would really like it if you can let some of the kids follow you around while you do your work."

The prospect of his peaceful design sessions being disturbed by the nagging and antics overactive teenagers did not sit well with Ves.

Even so, he did not completely reject the offer. He needed to build up a design team, and it was better to hire a mech designer who he shaped from the beginning.

Ves only started mentoring Ketis for a couple of years and the results already satisfied him. Repeating the same process at an earlier stage with his family at least gave him a lot more confidence in their loyalty.

Whereas other subordinate mech designers might eventually decide to leave the LMC in order to start their own companies, the LMC would always remain as the definite home to Larkinson mech designers.

"How many seeds does the family want to foist upon me, Melkor?"

"Not much. Two to four. No more. We don't have a tradition of studying the sciences in our family, so our choices are limited."

That sounded manageable. If nothing else, Ves could apply his usual solution to something he didn't want to be bothered with by foisting the brats to someone else, which in this case would be Ketis.

The thought of Ketis mentoring a bunch of impressionable Larkinson kids sent a shiver through his back for some reason. Who knew what kind of lessons they would really learn from her tutelage!

If only he had someone saner like Carlos. Too bad Ves hadn't heard a word from him in months.

"Alright, I can accept that. I'll make sure to give them some guidance, but that's it. I won't pamper them or hold their hands. Mech design is a tough profession and everyone who aspires to be one has to put in their earnest effort."

Melkor nodded in agreement. "The family knows. Otherwise they wouldn't be dealing with such a limited selection. The elders aren't expecting you to bring

up someone as talented and exceptional as you. It's enough to turn them into decently mech designers who can sustain your legacy and keep the family involved in the mech industry."

The Larkinson family firmly decided to pivot their focus in this direction. Ves was uncomfortable with this change because a part of him didn't want to change the family. They were doing just fine before he came along.

Now, he felt as if his very existence corrupted the family into chasing after wealth and powers.

"Is that all you want to inform me about, or is there more?" Ves wearily asked.

"Well, it's not directly related to you, but there's discussion among the elders to give some of the retired Larkinsons who want to move into the new compound something to do. A proposal has come up for some of our retired mech pilots to work as mech instructors at Freslin's basic mech academy."

That sounded very significant. "I don't know if that is going to work, Melkor. The quality of mech cadets from Cloudy Curtain is very low."

"That's why our mech instructors will likely be very welcome at the local mech academy. There's even another proposal on the table that suggest we outright take it over!"

"Whoah there! Take it over? Are the elders back at Rittersberg crazy?! Running a mech academy is a big responsibility!"

Melkor smirked. "I think we can do it. A lot of our mech pilots who retire from the Mech Corps often move on to become mech instructors or mech tutors. An instructor with the Larkinson name is very popular, you know. It's just that most of the Larkinsons only get to work for others in this capacity. It's a nice change to be able to set their own curriculum and teach the mech cadets according to their own methods."

These proposals hint at something greater to Ves. He narrowed his eyes in suspicion at Melkor. Unfortunately, his cousin's huge visor always made it difficult to get a read on him. Ves even thought of wearing one himself seeing how useful it was in throwing other people off.

"This sounds to me as if the family is intending to entrench themselves on Cloudy Curtain." He eventually said. "A mech academy isn't particularly profitable, especially in a desolated place like this planet."

"Times are changing, and the family is changing as well. The New Larkinson Family is just as stagnant as the Ylvaine Protectorate. It's time we crawl out of our shells and make something of ourselves."

"That's a very unfortunate way of putting it, Melkor. The New Ylvaine Dynasty degenerated into terrorists and extremists."

"If the family wants to get ahead, we're bound to take some risks. It's no different from what you are doing."

Ves had to admit that his cousin got him there.

#### **Chapter 1245 Sustainable Growth**

As his birthday got nearer and nearer, the mood in the company had grown more jubilant. Even though Ves refused to turn his birthday into a company event, every employee saw it as a milestone.

Their boss was one of the youngest Journeyman in the Bright Republic! Not only that, but he became a saint of the Ylvaine Protectorate!

The repercussions of the latter slowly dawned upon the leadership of the company as they saw a lot of new opportunities in the neighboring state.

"It's kind of crazy how far demand has outstripped our supply." Calsie reported in his office. "The hype for our products has become so high that some savvy owners of our existing mechs are beginning to offer them up to the Ylvainans in the second-hand market."

That did not sound good to Ves. "Second-hand mechs aren't as good as first-hand mechs."

"There's no choice. Even with our fancy new production lines, our production capacity is wholly insufficient to service the massive amount of demand that has flooded our sales channels. If there's one bright spot, it's that the Ylvainans have learned to appreciate the differences between our labels. The gold label mechs are being resold at insane markups! Even our silver label mechs are being resold as if they are new."

The hype around his mechs was crazy, but Ves didn't expect it to last.

"A spike in demand never lasts very long." Calsie said. "According to our marketing analysts, once the Ylvainans get back to their lives, demand will subside, but it will always be several times higher than the old levels. The more we exploit our partnership with Madame Cecily, the more we can build up demand that is grounded in reality and that we can sustain."

There was a difference between the two. Hype was always something that only lasted for a short time. Ves couldn't bank on his status as the Bright Martyr to sell mediocre mechs. The LMC needed to convert the short-term advantages of hype into a long-term advantage that ensured its continued success in the Protectorate.

Ves was glad that the LMC were already developing plans of that nature. "The Marketing Department has done a good job, but I don't think they fully understand the Ylvainans. Tell them to hire some experts that can advise us how to market our products to the Ylvainans. They're really different compared to Brighters or Reinaldians."

"Will do, Ves. We've already started hiring some managers and experts to represent our interests in the joint venture in the Protectorate. Once we got

some of our people on the ground, we'll be able to obtain a better read of the local mech market."

"Keep me in the loop." Ves commanded. "We need to be careful to pursue gradual growth. As long as we don't threaten to take over the mech market, our Ylvainan competitors are more inclined to accept our place in their midst."

"Sounds like you got a good handle on the politics."

The higher Ves and the LMC climbed, the greater the role of politics and cross-border relations. It frustrated him a bit that he needed to pay attention to these kinds of issues in the first place. It was a lot simpler to deal with fair competition than political compromises and backroom deals.

"How do the developments in the Ylvaine Protectorate affect our operations in the Bright Republic and other markets?"

"We mainly produce the Blackbeak and Crystal Lord at the Mech Nursery." She reported. "We've pretty much saturated the domestic market with those two mech models. While the celebrity effect that Gavin told me about has caused a surge in demand, it's not enough to flood us like the Ylvainans are doing at the moment. This is why the surge in demand from the Protectorate is like a timely rain after a drought. It keeps our production lines running at full capacity for the next year or two at the very least."

Ves nodded. The LMC already sold thousands of Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords in the Bright Republic alone. The mech buyers who wanted to obtain one of these mechs already bought them by now.

It was different in the Ylvaine Protectorate. The mech buyers there only bought a couple of hundred of his mechs so far, but now that he and his company suddenly became prominent there, thousands of mech buyers wanted to try out the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord models!

"What about the Aurora Titan?"



"As you know, apart from the gold label editions, NORA Consolidated is responsible for producing most of them. They've reported to us that they've received a surge in demand for the Aurora Titan as well, but not as extreme as we are seeing. It's a niche mech model, and an expensive one at that. Even so, Professor Ventag's mech company has allocated several more production lines to the production of the Aurora Titan in order to meet this additional demand."

"NORA Consolidated is much bigger than the LMC. They have the production lines to spare, unlike us."

The LMC still benefited from the surge in demand. Even if the LMC was only entitled to twenty-five percent of the profits from the sale of the Aurora Titan, the model was so expensive that it still amounted to a generous sum of money!

Talking about their bottleneck in production prompted Calsie to make a suggestion. "Considering the considerable surge in demand, perhaps it would be a good idea to expand our production lines again. Our cash flow is abundant and the money we're accumulating isn't doing any good in our accounts."

If it was before, Ves wouldn't consider this option. He originally planned to accumulate a warchest in order to obtain the new licenses that would be released at the start of the mech generation.

That wasn't necessary now. The deal he made with Senator Tovar and Professor Ventag gave him easy access to future component licenses. The LMC could invest its proceeds into other investments.

He made a decision. "I'm not opposed to expanding our production lines. Draw up a plan and perform an analysis on how much we can afford to spend and how much future demand the LMC expects to meet. I want to make a

decision based on our circumstances instead of my gut feeling. We also have to get the board of directors to agree with the expansion."

Even though he could simply order Calsie to expand the production capacity of the Mech Nursery by twenty production lines, would the LMC really need that much extra capacity? Perhaps in ten years maybe, but not necessarily sooner.

After Calsie noted all of the decisions he made, she left his office and made sure to get the ball rolling.

"It's amazing to see how far I've come since I founded the LMC." He whispered to himself while he leaned back against his padded office chair.

The LMC was on the right track. Aside from its tiny mech catalog, his company was doing better than ever before, which was very remarkable considering the economic malaise that was just starting to subside.

To Ves, the company operated like a 3D printer. Although it looked like a single entity from the outside, it contained a lot of moving parts inside, each of which performed a different role.

While he was a lot more hands-on at the start, he continually upgraded the 3D printer's automation to the point where it could perform its job without any input from him apart from making major decisions.

How many thirty-year olds can boast of leading such a prosperous company?

"This is the power of a Journeyman."

Of course, a company only served as a means to an end. Ves already knew that Journeymen would need to invest a lot of money into research.

Advancing to Senior made it worse, as the money he was required to fund his research ballooned!

"What kind of research are Seniors performing in the first place to make them spend so much money?" Ves frowned.

It probably involved a lot of exotics. Perhaps they were seeking breakthroughs of their design philosophies by trying to see if certain exotics enhanced their effects. Perhaps they were performing some sort of alchemy by combining several remarkable exotics to achieve the effect they desired.

Whatever the case, even Master Mech Designers still spent a stupendous amount of money to further their research!

Soon, Ves would join this race as well. He guessed that his upcoming visit to the sector headquarters of the MTA would answer many of his questions related to how a mech designer progressed after reaching Journeyman.

After he daydreamed for a while, Ves decided to study the Caskar Pike design before he resumed his fabrication work.

The spaceborn missileer mech was based on a simple concept, but the Skull Architect executed it very well. He did his utmost into maximizing every component he included into its design without leaving much room for waste and inefficiency.

"To be honest, I can learn a thing or two from his design choices."

Although the promise of designing fifteen variants for the Skull Architect sounded like a heavy burden, the opportunity to study fifteen different annotated and well-documented design schematics was a hidden benefit.

As long as Ves took care not to absorb any lessons that was incompatible to his design philosophy, he foresaw that he could apply a lot of the Skull Architect's crafty solutions in his future mech designs.

"Just by studying this missileer design gives me the confidence to design my own missileer mech."

Naturally, learning like this had its faults as well, as Ves would still allow himself to be influenced by another mech designer.

"My growth needs to be sustainable."

That meant he should take just enough notes to help him develop his own solutions instead of copying them directly from the Skull Architect's own designs. The moment he relied on someone else's work as a template for his own solutions was the moment he stopped innovating and developing his own solutions.

Considering that higher advancement placed a very high demand on innovation, Ves could not afford to lose his will to fight if he wanted to advance to Master one day.

"Perhaps this is the real trap." He realized. "Aside from its control problems, the Caskar Pike is so powerful and efficient that I'm really tempted to design my own missileer."

If he truly followed this impulse, then the ingenious design choices he observed from the Caskar Pike would definitely be applied to his own design. The resulting work would share many similarities.

"What a devious trap." He quietly cursed.

The Skull Architect was the true devil among mech designers!

For some reason, he liked to torment other mech designers by seducing them to abandon their ways!

Perhaps this was the pirate designer's means to recruit subordinate mech designers into his design team. Since he wasn't a university professor anymore, he didn't have access to a large body of mech design students who he could nurture into his assistants.

"Even so, why can't he just recruit mech designers openly?!"

There were lots of desperate mech designers like Ketis who requested to be mentored by an esteemed Senior!

Instead of adopting a normal selection process, the Skull Architect instead resorted to blackhearted tricks that inevitably ended poorly to the mech designer in question.

Once a young mech designer failed to resist the Skull Architect's allure, they would be dependent on him to advance further on a path that wasn't their own.

The Skull Architect was the most morally bankrupt mech designer he had ever met! Ves could hardly fathom a mech designer who was more despicable than someone who thought that murdering an expert pilot was a good idea!

The sooner Ves got rid of the Skull Architect, the safer he would be! Who knows what kind of plans this crazy mech designer had in store!

Mech designers like the Skull Architect illustrated that only a thin line separated genius from madness.

"With all of the ordeals I've experienced lately, I don't even know how ragged my own line has become."

#### **Chapter 1246 Birthday Boy**

The subject of his age was a complicated question. Due to the effects of relativity and anomalies that distorted the passage of time, one person's age was not always clearly defined.

Ves spent a lot of time on Aeon Corona VII. The heavy gravity planet and its time-warping environment physically aged him past thirty years quite some while ago.

To put it simply, his body already celebrated its thirtieth birthday. Only now did the standard Terran calendar belatedly caught up to this fact.

The difference didn't matter too much. The discrepancy between his physical and his official age was less than a year. This was a lot different from the more extreme cases in the galaxy where fifty-year olds were still teenagers on their record!

He didn't feel too different when he woke up on his bed. He yawned and stretched his arms, only to feel a weight on his chest.

"Meow."

"Lucky? Did you forgive me now?"

"Meow."

His cat lightly swatted his cheek before turning intangible and phasing away.

"Well, at least I made some progress." He muttered.

He figured that this was Lucky's way of expressing that he hadn't quite gotten over the incident yet. Still, some change was better than nothing. After weeks of acting like he didn't exist, Lucky finally acknowledged his existence again.

After he freshened himself up, he looked through his wardrobe. He didn't buy his own clothes anymore, letting Gavin take care of those trivial issues.

His wardrobe also included several sets of smart clothes preconfigured in elegant and luxurious looks. Because they were imports from the Friday Coalition, Ves wasn't sure about wearing them. They looked a bit gaudy, as if their wearers eagerly wanted to rub their wealth in the faces of the lower classes who couldn't afford such an outfit.

"Well, I'm a Journeyman now." He realized. "That's a step up from many well-off citizens of the Friday Coalition."

Citizens of third-rate states always thought of themselves as inferior to a citizen of a second-rate state.

That didn't mean that a receptionist from the Friday Coalition could smack around a CEO from the Bright Republic, but there was always a sense that someone's birthplace determined their ultimate station in life.

Ves shook his head. "Now that I'm a Journeyman, there's no reason for me to feel envious of Fridaymen. In fact, they should feel envious of me! I'm a galactic citizen!"

A Journeyman enjoyed high regard wherever he went. The prestige of this title guaranteed good treatment wherever he went.

After some thought, he decided to dress like he acted, and chose to set aside his preference for understated clothing and picked out some smart clothes configured in a rich green formal suit.

As Ves viewed his appearance in a mirror projection, he had to admit that he exuded confidence that he didn't have before. If he was still an Apprentice, then he would have unconsciously thought that he was being pretentious.

As Ves headed up to his office in the LMC's headquarters, he received many congratulations and well wishes from his employees.

"Happy birthday, boss!"

"Happy birthday, Mr. Larkinson!"

Ves smiled as he took in the optimistic mood that had spread over the entire complex. Every worker in the LMC felt lucky to be working for a mech designer who made so many achievements when he was still young.

When he arrived at his office, Gavin expressed the main reason for their optimism.

"The LMC is too small for a company led by a Journeyman." He said. "Didn't you visit the facilities of the now-defunct Kadar-Neyvis Group once? That's where the LMC is heading towards in a couple of years. There are already

plans in the works to expand our presence, and to do that we need to hire a lot more workers who need to be managed somehow."

"And who better to manage them than our existing employees?" Ves guessed the rest.

"Indeed. While we won't promote a cleaning bot technician into the head of maintenance overnight, as long as it isn't too extreme, many of our workers will move on to become team leaders or managers to manage the influx."

The existing workers of the LMC may not be necessarily better or more qualified than the newcomers. Yet the company valued them more because they had proven themselves to be loyal, trustworthy and aligned with the company's values.

The latter was especially important for the company to maintain its cohesion and identity. By letting the old hands propagate the company culture to the newcomers, the latter would eventually become indistinguishable from the former.

"I hear there are plans in the works to open up a second site." Ves mentioned.

"There is a lot of consideration for opening up a second manufacturing complex on Bentheim, boss. I don't know what your issue is with setting up shop on Bentheim, but you should really consider it. Right now, the logistics of operating a manufacturing complex on Cloudy Curtain is manageable, but that's only because our products are mainly premium mechs. What if you design a cheaper mech one day? The logistical burden of mass-producing so many mechs will perpetually strain our supply chain."

Ves understood Gavin's point. It took an increasing amount of transports and cargo haulers to ship the raw materials from Bentheim to Cloudy Curtain. The time and money being wasted on this channel was growing increasingly more significant.



They would definitely balloon once the LMC began to offer cheaper mechs with lower margins. This was because a mech valued at 20 million credits used up almost the same amount of materials as a mech valued at 100 million credits!

While the quality and price of materials differed drastically, the space they occupied usually didn't differ too much. This essentially meant that producing high-volume mechs on Cloudy Curtain would disproportionately impact the company's profitability!

Although Ves always felt leery about expanding the LMC's presence on Bentheim, he was no longer as afraid as before. The local gangs that ran rife on that hectic planet generally respected the properties of high-ranking mech designers.

Even if they didn't, his friendly relations with the Blood Claws insured adequate protection.

"Draw up a plan." Ves replied, giving out his usual response to major decisions like this. "While I'm not too giddy about it, I do think it's time to diversify our production sites. I still want the Mech Nursery to be the primary site of production for our premium mechs. It's safer, quieter and more secure here. That's worth the burden it imposes on our supply chain."

After they discussed some other business matters, Gavin finally smiled. "Your birthday party is scheduled to start in the evening. We've tried our best to keep it small, but we had to expand the venue because of the arrival of some surprising guests."

"Oh? Are there any names I should take note of in the guest list, Benny?"

"I'll let that be a surprise for tonight, Ves. Suffice to say, there are some very esteemed guests among the people who have come to celebrate your birthday."

"I wanted my birthday party to be a family event." Ves stated flatly. "How come we're suddenly entertaining esteemed guests?"

Gavin shrugged. "It's hard to say no to some of these people. They see a lot of promise in you and want to establish closer ties while you're still approachable and not fully adjusted to your new status."

"So they're essentially betting that I'll reach Senior one day."

"Right."

Even if it sounded as if these guests came with ulterior motives, Ves didn't mind. As a mech designer and businessman, he learned the importance of establishing an extensive network. He could obtain many conveniences that he otherwise wouldn't be able to obtain by trading favors.

Coming to celebrate his birthday was just an excuse for his guests to forge closer ties.

"How many Larkinsons have come?"

"Not too much. It's not that they don't respect you, but it's difficult for them to set aside their responsibilities and obligations."

"I understand. It doesn't help that I live in the Bentheim region. It takes too much time for the Larkinsons from Rittersberg to reach Cloudy Curtain. It takes even more time for them to get back."

Time passed by as Ves took it easy. Aside from making some business decisions or checking up on the state of his company, he didn't do anything too strenuous.

In the meantime, Cloudy Curtain saw an uptick in traffic in recent days as various starships and shuttles descended from orbit and touched down onto the expansive landing zone of the Mech Nursery.

Guests from Bentheim, Rittersberg and elsewhere diverted all the way to Cloudy Curtain for only one reason, and it wasn't for its cloud rice.

The evening finally arrived. Ves finally left his office and leisurely walked across the campus to a newly-refurbished banquet hall situated next to the auditorium. One of the gold label Aurora Titans that Ves recently fabricated stood proudly in front of its terrace.

Its strong aura of love and protectiveness instantly surged the moods of many visitors and drew admiration from each of them. The opportunity to witness a mech handcrafted by Ves was becoming increasingly rarer.

Yet once anyone witnessed his works up close and in person, they recalled why they valued Ves so much! Only he could design and produce such compelling mechs!

"Ves!" Ketis called and waved her hand. She scurried over to him. "Come on! Let's head inside!"

As she dragged him past his Aurora Titan and the mob of admirers, Ves glanced at her current outfit.

Ordinarily, she dressed in trendy clothing that made her look disarming and nothing like a pirate. It made her look like an average student studying at a good university.

This time, she dressed up. Not only did she have her hair styled in a curly way that conveniently hid her horns, but she also shed her casual ensemble for a modest red dress that exposed her lean, muscular limbs.

"You look very.. feminine, Ketis."

She grinned at him with a face that looked even lovelier in makeup. "It's your birthday, silly. Of course I'll dress up for the occasion!"

Once she led him inside to the foyer, Ves came across a dozen or so Larkinsons spanning multiple generations.

From elders such as Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson to members of the younger generation such as Lanie Larkinson, a small slice of the family had come all the way to celebrate the birthday of one of their most prominent members in recent years.

To Ves' surprise, his grandfather Benjamin arrived in person!

"Grandpa, I didn't expect to see you here!"

"How can I forget about the birthday of one of my grandsons? It's easy enough for me to schedule a working visit to Bentheim and set some time aside to attend your birthday."

Ves felt very warm, and not just because of the Aurora Titan in the vicinity.

"Thank you for visiting."

"It's the best I can do for you. I would have loved to see your father and mother here as well, but..."

"Yeah." Ves said lamely.

The mood between them dipped for a moment.

Benjamin shook his head. "Let's not linger on unpleasantries for tonight. I'm sure your father is happy for you and wishes to be here. Here's my present to you. It's nothing much to someone who is worth billions of credits, but it's the love that counts."

His grandfather gestured with his hands, causing a floating gift-wrapped box to hover over to the birthday boy.

Although Ves felt a little awkward, his grandfather encouraged him to open it on the spot.

After carefully tearing apart the wrapping, he opened the box and picked up a small potted plant.

"This is...?"

"It's a young prosperity tree. It grew out of a seed from the original prosperity tree at the Larkinson Compound. Do you remember that big tree in the back? You might not know this, but the Larkinson Ancestor personally brought that prosperity tree with him when he packed up his bags and left for the Komodo Star Sector. From where he came from, the prosperity tree represents good fortune. They're very hard to grow naturally so make sure to take care of it attentively."

Although Ves felt a little bit underwhelmed by getting a miniature tree of all things, it was the thought that counted. "Thanks. I'll treasure it and hope it will one day grow as tall as the original tree."

This was a present that carried a lot of symbolism. His grandfather essentially sent the message that the Larkinsons placed high expectations on him. Just as how the Larkinson Ancestor fought to make his descendents enjoy a good station in life in the present, Ves might be able to pull the Larkinsons even further.

#### **Chapter 1247 Old Acquaintances**

Ves passed on the young prosperity tree to Gavin. In turn, Gavin passed it on to a bot to place it on a display.

Afterwards, Ves greeted the other Larkinsons who each congratulated him and presented him with gifts, most of which consisted of forgettable trinkets.

It was very hard to come up with a good present to someone who could outright buy the total assets of the Larkinson Estate several times over!

Still, they needed to express their sincerity in some way, so they decided to follow the same strategy as Benjamin by gifting presents that carried a symbolic or sentimental meaning.

The only problem with this was that Ves only cared for the sentiments of those he cared about in person. Just because he shared the same family name as them didn't mean he particularly liked them or appreciated their company.

Perhaps the most odious Larkinson Ves had met tonight was Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson.

After gifting Ves with a shard salvaged from an old expert mech wreck, the elder in charge of the trust fund eagerly patted his back.

"You've heard of my grandson Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson, yes? He's an expert candidate just like Jannzi. He served admirably during the recent war, and right now he's placing all of his efforts into breaking through to expert pilot."

"I'm sure he'll succeed one day." Ves politely responded even if he wanted to swat away the slimy old man's hand from his back.

"The Mech Corps and other institutions offer many training programs that increase the chance of breakthroughs. While I'm sure that Tusa doesn't have to rely on them, the faster he breaks through, the sooner our entire family benefits from the addition of another expert pilot in our ranks. If you lend a hand to him during this time, I'm sure he'll reciprocate the favor."

After several minutes of babbling, Ves eventually learned the true reason why Raymond was buttering him up so much. He wanted Ves to invest several hundred million credits into Tusa's training.

"While the Mech Corps is a fine place to seek a breakthrough, the Friday Coalition offers even better training programs." Raymond explained. "As long as my grandson can pay the entry fee, he can benefit from the wisdom of a

second-rate state, not only increasing his chances of breaking through, but also allowing him to absorb some of the skills of a second-class mech pilot!"

While Ves maintained his polite smile, he inwardly cursed Raymond for being a greedy old bastard.

Of course, he couldn't ruin the festive mood by uttering something like that aloud.

"I think the family should make this decision collectively, Raymond." He said in a mild but slightly warning tone of voice. "The ample dividends the Larkinson Estate receive should be more than enough to cover these kinds of investments. It's not fair for me to openly favor one Larkinson expert candidate over another."

Raymond knew he couldn't make any further progress when he heard that so he stopped insisting. "You've raised a good point, Ves. I was merely thinking that since you're so wealthy, you don't mind spending this trivial amount of money."

"A few hundred-million credits is not trivial. Whatever you think of my wealth, my business ventures eat up most of what I earn." Ves lied.

In truth, Ves was flush with more money than he knew where to spend it on. While he reserved quite a bit to fund the expansion of the Avatars of Myth, the rest of his money was essentially sitting in the bank.

Even if he wasn't hurting for money at the moment, Ves did not want to make it a habit to lend or give away his cash whenever a Larkinson held out their hand and begged.

Therefore, after shutting down Raymond, half of the Larkinsons who wanted to chat with him further all declined to say anything more than pleasantries.

Perhaps the most lighthearted Larkinson he greeted was Lanie Larkinson.

The little girl had grown into a big girl. Ves remembered meeting her shortly after he embarked on his career. After five years of growth, the girl was approaching ten years old, which meant she would soon find out whether she possessed the right genetic aptitude to pilot mechs.

Ves generously smiled at Lanie after she gifted him with a handknit shawl. "Did you make this yourself?"

Lanie eagerly nodded. "I don't know if I want to become a mech pilot or mech designer, but I've been practicing my handicraft in case I decide to follow in your footsteps!"

"It's very hard to become a mech designer, Lanie. While being good with your hands is useful, it's more important to have a knack in science and engineering. Even then, you still have to study hard in order to graduate."

The young girl didn't look fazed at all. "I'll surely succeed! By the way, where's Lucky? He's so fun! I miss him so much!"

"She might know where my cat has gone." He said while gesturing at Ketis. "If you have any questions about mech design, feel free to ask her as she's also a mech designer."

"Okay!"

The girl enthusiastically scampered off to Ketis, causing Ves and the other Larkinsons to chuckle.

"Kids are precious, Ves." His grandfather remarked in a goodnaturedly fashion. "They liven up your life and help you remember the joys of your own life. Children are the best gifts that you can have."

The implicit message was that Ves should hurry up and marry so that he could have kids of his own.



After he finished greeting the Larkinsons, Ves greeted his other guests. With Gavin's help, he was instantly able to greet some of the unknown faces by name, which easily earned him some of their appreciation.

"Yoni Ricklin. What an unexpected surprise to see you here." Ves politely shook the middle-aged man's hand.

The Ricklin generously smiled at Ves. "I came to convey Madame Catelyn Ricklin's well wishes. Unfortunately, she couldn't be here herself, but she wants to make sure you are aware of her good intentions."

"That is welcome news. I thought that you Ricklins were rather irate at me for being involved in Vincent Ricklin's defection."

How could Ves forget about his first custom job where Vincent insisted on adding a codpiece to his mech?!

"What happened that day was a tragedy. Many elders of the Ricklin family lost their lives." Yoni firmly shook his head. "However, now that five years have passed, Madame Catelyn is no longer hysterical whenever she recalls this incident. She realized that it's unfair to blame you for supplying Vincent with the weapon that slew many of our lineage. Any mech could have done the same."

"I'm glad to hear that. None of us thought that Vincent would be so crazy to join the Bentheim Liberation Movement. How is he, by the way?"

Yoni sighed. "Vincent is still at large, to our entire family's shame. From the scattered intelligence we've gathered, our wayward family member has slowly climbed up the ranks and has become one of their side leaders. It doesn't appear he'll get caught anytime soon."

That was a small but persistent worry to Ves. Still, the BLM shouldn't have any reason to target him directly, so he quickly threw his concerns aside.

After receiving Yoni's present which turned out to be a small but highly-suspect processor chip, Ves moved on to greet another notable figure.

"Alistair Cordwraith." Ves greeted the executive assistant. He didn't need Gavin's help to recall the unassuming but sharply-dressed man's name. "I did not expect to see you here myself."

The man shook hands with Ves. "Senator Tovar wishes you well. He has paid a keen amount of interest in you ever since you returned from the Ylvaine Protectorate. It has always been one of his dreams to forge a friendship with our isolationist neighbor. Now that you single-handedly opened up a major opportunity, our diplomatic corps has been hard at work ever since."

"The Ylvainans may hold some odd beliefs, but they are quite friendly once you get past their shells."

The gift that Alistair handed to Ves turned out to be a data pad that contained a bunch of official documents.

They mostly came from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economic Development. While it took some effort for Ves to figure out the legalese, he figured out that they essentially authorized him and his company to engage in greater foreign activities with less bureaucratic oversight.

Alistair explained what they meant. "There is a lot of red tape involved whenever a domestic mech company begins to expand its operations in other states. The senator believes your company has a lot of promise catering to foreign markets. Your stunning achievement in opening up the Protectorate attests to that. For this reason, he has lobbied on your behalf to make it easier to do business across borders."

While Ves didn't completely understand the conveniences these authorizations provided to him, he accepted them nonetheless. He passed the data pad to Gavin who eagerly began to read the documents right away.

"Please convey my thanks to the senator for his consideration."

It seemed the senator still paid a significant amount of attention to him. Whether this was good or bad, Ves didn't know.

Aside from meeting officials and representatives, Ves also met some acquaintances who were remarkable by themselves.

Ves happened to meet another old friend from the start of his career.

"Charlotte Hoffmeister!"

"You still remember me, Ves." She smiled back.

"How can I forget the mech pilot who piloted my first competition mechs?"

"It's been a long time since we competed at the Young Tigers Exhibition." She said. She looked calmer and more mature since they last worked together to reach the finals. "Both of us has come a long way since then, though I never expected you to explode to Journeyman this soon. That's really significant to MTA, I can tell you that."

"You would know, since you're a part of them now. It's really impressive that you managed to catch their eye!" Ves sincerely complimented.

Indeed. While Charlotte was among the younger of the guests, she was like an elephant in the room due to wearing an MTA mess dress uniform!

Not only that, but her uniform bore the insignia of the association's Compliance Department, which was their most feared enforcement unit!

Charlotte nonetheless shook her head. "I'm not as impressive as you think I am. I'm still a low-ranking trainee mech pilot in the MTA's hierarchy. I have a lot more to go before I enter their ranks in earnest."

"I'm sure you'll be able to distinguish yourself in time."

It was nice to catch up with an old acquaintance and see what they made of themselves since they last met. Even though Ves had taken a huge leap forward, Charlotte shouldn't feel sorry for herself because she managed to join the most powerful mech fighting force in the galaxy!

Even if the MTA's branch in the Komodo Star Sector didn't equal the branches closer to the center of the galaxy, Charlotte could still expect to pilot some great mechs in the future.

She would also be eligible to receive the latest gene optimization treatments that her rank afforded her! That alone caused her to attract a lot of hidden envy from the mech pilots in the hall!

Once they finished exchanging pleasantries, Charlotte passed her present to Ves. The present was rather peculiar. She gave him an invitation card.

"You've recently advanced to Journeyman, right? That means you'll visit the Centerpoint System soon. While I haven't been there myself, you can use this card to an exclusive club on Centerpoint V. You won't regret the visit once you get inside."

"Sounds mysterious."

Charlotte grinned. "I don't want to spoil the surprise."

This was his second invitation card. Ves still recalled that he still hadn't used his invitation card to the Angel's Wing Foundation.

After carefully stowing away the card, Ves greeted one more acquaintance.

"Patricia. I must say I did not expect to see you here as well." Ves said while offering his most charming smile to someone he used to look up to during his student days.

The mech designer apprenticed to Master Null elegantly offered her hand, which Ves gently shook. Patricia Schneider looked as elegant and inscrutable as ever.

"We both came a long way since we graduated from Rittersberg University of Technology and competed in the Young Tigers Exhibition, Ves. You've managed to make a stunning achievement by advancing to Journeyman so soon. I'm still an Apprentice." She sighed.

"You've always been talented, Patricia. I'm sure you'll catch up in no time."

"We'll see. Mech design is not a race."

"So what brings you to the Bright Republic?"

"I'm picking up my parents so that they can attend my wedding." She said.

"I'm engaged to a mech designer from the Vermeer Group. We decided to tie the knot this year."

"Oh." Ves said while he tried to maintain his best smile. "Congratulations. I'm very happy for you, Patricia."

"Thank you, Ves."

#### **Chapter 1248 Sentimental Gifts**

Five years was a lot of time for people to change, Ves realized. Meeting some of his old acquaintances made it clear that life moved on for everyone.

While Ves experienced unimaginably perilous adventures and advanced to an enviable height in his career, other people haven't been slacking off either.

Although Charlotte made it sound as if she hadn't achieved anything at all, Ves knew that she was already set to ascend to an unimaginable height as long as she worked hard.

As for Patricia, while she made it sound as if she was just an Apprentice, Ves did not believe that a mech designer as exceptional as her would remain

obscure forever. She had always been surrounded by mystery ever since she showed off her amazing competence in mech design. That had only increased ever since she mixed up with the even more mysterious Master Null in the Friday Coalition.

Once he received her present which turned out to be a data chip that contained a rare textbook, Ves calmly stepped away from Patricia. Gavin, who was following a half-step behind, patted his back in an encouraging fashion.

"Buck up, Ves. Even if one ship has sailed, plenty more are still anchored in port."

Ves swatted away his assistant's hand. "Stop kidding around. It's not like that."

"Sure, boss. Whatever you say."

In order to take his mind off meeting several old acquaintances, he greeted the only Larkinson who stood alone.

In fact, his grandfather the rest of the family tried their best not to acknowledge their black sheep!

"I see you haven't repaired your relations with the family at all, Raella."

"Hmph! Those old coots took one look at my clothes before shaking their heads in disappointment." Raella huffed. She gestured towards her outfit, which made her Blood Claw allegiance abundantly clear. "I could hear them telling Lanie and the other kids that they shouldn't follow my example. That's the only value I have left to the Larkinsons."

"Don't talk down on yourself like that, Raella. Everyone has a different station in life. You should be glad that you found your own calling."

"Whatever. I haven't come here to talk about my family issues. Today is all about you, Ves. Congratulations for growing up. You're a bigshot now. Some

of the senior cadre of the Blood Claws even glowingly mentioned you a few times in my presence. They appreciate the things you've done for them and Walter's Whalers."

"I'm glad to hear the Blood Claws hold me in high regard." Ves smiled a bit thinly. He would rather prefer he didn't catch their attention. "Has anything changed lately?"

Raella proudly nodded. "I finally promoted to Blood Champion Captain! You could say I'm part of their cadre now!"

"Congratulations, Raella. That's a big achievement!"

"Any mech pilot of my skill can climb this far. This is just the start!" She boasted. "I have to admit, my family name and my ties with you is a big reason why I promoted so quickly."

"Do you feel like you got promoted solely due to those advantages?"

"Nah. The Blood Claws aren't silly. They don't put useless people in charge. I've proven myself for several years. Once my bosses realized that I'm here to stay, they've steadily increased my responsibilities. I'm in charge of a lot of underground mech duelists now."

"That sounds very impressive."

The Blood Claws could have given her a grand-sounding title that possessed little actual substance.

Instead, they actually put her in charge of something that allowed her to accumulate valuable leadership experience. It meant that they were really serious about investing in Raella despite her potentially problematic family name.

"By the way, Melinda wanted to attend your birthday party as well, but a captain of the Planetary Guard can't just up and run to Cloudy Curtain. I brought her present along with my own."

Ves received a handcrafted mug bearing an evil caricature of his face from Raella. In his opinion, plastering the words 'Devil Tongue' underneath the cartoonish image wasn't even necessary.

"Wow." He uttered goodnaturedly. "Whoever created this caricature is good."

"I just commissioned a random artist from the galactic net to paint your face this way." Raella dismissively waved her hand.

"I'll definitely place this mug on my desk." He said before passing it over to Gavin to be placed on the central display.

Next, he opened up his present from Melinda next, which turned out to be a small scale model of a Planetary Guard mech. In fact, she piloted this exact same mech model!

Raella grinned at the sight of the miniature mech. "Melinda figured that since you're a mech designer, you'd appreciate a mech. She remembers that you used to play with mech figurines all the time when you were a little kid! You'd cry like a baby whenever she held one of your toys out of your reach!"

Ves lightly whacked her stomach while he tried to hold in his embarrassment.

"Please don't pass around stories like that, especially now."

"Ooof! What have you eaten these days?" She moaned while rubbing her tummy. "Have you no sympathy for a girl?"

"You're a Blood Champion Captain. I know you can take it, Raella."

"Heh. At least you acknowledge that I'm the big sister here."



Even though Raella and Melinda's presents didn't amount to much, Ves appreciated them anyway. These gifts may be ordinary objects, but they carried their sincere sentiments.

This was exactly what Ves wanted to experience during his birthday party.

Before Ves moved on to the sumptuous banquet, he greeted a surprising guest who arrived fairly late to the party.

The man's robed figure was extremely striking to Ves, since he had seen the same style of garments from many Ylvainans!

"Welcome to my birthday party." Ves politely greeted the latecomer. "Cloudy Curtain is a long way from the Ylvaine Protectorate. What brings you here?"

"Not every Ylvainan is afraid of the dark." The young man said with a smooth voice that exuded youth and strength. "Ever since I stepped into the Bright Republic, I found that there is plenty of light. It is an honor to meet the Bright Martyr. Ah, where are my manners? My name is James Immel. I'm currently on a business tour to experience the many diverse cultures this star sector has to offer."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "It must be quite difficult to obtain permission to travel abroad. Not every Ylvainan is as open-minded as you. Are you a Curin?"

"Not exactly." James shook his head underneath the hood of his robe. "I'm not affiliated with any of the three dynasties. I lead a modest company that is looking to take advantage of the opportunities that are opening up. I'm very charmed with the words you've spoken that day. My people should be looking outwards, not inwards. I've always held these thoughts in my heart, but after you revealed yourself, you gave all of us a chance to express our thoughts in the open."

"Ah, I'm glad to be of service to open-minded Ylvainans like you. Please enjoy the party and don't take offense to the other guests if they bother you about your faith."

James nonchalantly shrugged. "I take no offense at the inquiries of the unenlightened. In fact, I appreciate the insatiable curiosity of your fellow Brighters. They possess so many misunderstandings about our faith that it is always a pleasure to make them see our beliefs in another light."

This James sounded like a very magnanimous figure if he was telling the truth. Even though he obscured most of his body with his voluminous dark robe, there was a sense of ease around him that made Ves relax.

"With an attitude like that, I'm sure your company will enjoy much success when it enters into other markets."

When it came time for Ves to open the present he received from James, he momentarily lost his composure.

"This is... a very familiar-looking nutrient pack."

James released a smile. "It is a replica of the nutrient pack that used to be consumed by the prophet himself. Products like this have been circulating in the Ylvaine Protectorate ever since you were acquitted by the tribunal. It is our way of saying that there is nothing holy about nutrient packs."

Ves held the nutrient pack with a mixed expression. Its packaging was an exact match of the nutrient pack wrapper he stole from the Grand Cathedral of Ylvaine's Mercy.

He underestimated their humor. He couldn't imagine the Ylvainans would feel okay with mass producing this style of nutrient packs.

"It's a very accurate replica." Ves whispered.

He could tell, since he actually held the original.

"Even if it is just a replica, it is not worth any less than the original." James remarked while gesturing with his hand in a ritual fashion. "The original nutrient pack once fed a prophet and a visionary. Who knows if the nutrient pack in your hand will serve the same purpose one day?"

With those sagely words, the Ylvainan stepped back and faded to the sides to mingle with some of the other businessmen.

Ves looked down at the deceptively simple nutrient pack before passing it over to Gavin. "Put this nutrient pack in the list of sentimental gifts that I want to display in my office, Benny."

"Really, Ves? It's just a nutrient pack!"

"It's a nutrient pack with a story. That makes it more valuable than ninety percent of the gifts I received so far. It's worthy enough to be placed in my office."

Once Ves and Gavin made sure they greeted everyone of importance, Ves loudly clapped his hands.

"Alright, folks! Let's enter the banquet hall! I've been told that we've been hiring cooks from all over the star sector to sample the specialties of every state!"

Everyone filed into the expansive banquet hall that was capable of holding hundreds of guests with plenty of room to spare.

The interior design intrigued Ves a lot. The overwhelmingly white interior had been interspersed with artificial indoor pools upon which remarkable plants floated on the surface. Alien fish leisurely swam underneath the clear surface, giving everyone a dazzling view of the variety of species living alongside each other in harmony.

Ves hadn't been involved in designing this interior. In fact, he didn't know who the architect was in the first place.

"Calsie hired an architect from Moira's Paradise for the interior design." Gavin responded when he asked. "Since life is a recurring theme of yours, she wanted the banquet hall to incorporate a living element without being too intrusive."

"She certainly hired the right architect for the job. I'm very satisfied with this design. It's clean and elegant while remaining unpretentious."

The artistic principles behind the interior design differed from his own, but Ves appreciated it nonetheless. While Ves showed a clear preference towards grandeur and bombast, the architect focused more on class and elegance.

"The architect is probably a woman." He muttered.

Everyone slowly took their seats. Ves sat at a table next to Ketis, who eyed Raella with some guardedness.

Both women seemed to recognize each other as warriors. They exuded the same kind of air.

"Who is this woman, Ves? Your new girlfriend?" Raella asked.

Ves almost spewed the champagne he just sipped. "Ketis is a mech designer! She assists me in my design work!"

Fortunately, before this conversation could go any further, Lucky hopped onto the table and dropped an object onto the surface.

Because of the public setting, Lucky didn't expose his capabilities. To most of the visitors attending the party, Lucky was just a very attractive-looking mechanical cat.

"Meow."

"Is this my birthday present from you, Lucky?"

"Meow!"

The gift that Lucky dropped onto the table was very.. strange. It was a full-sized plushy doll modeled after Lucky himself!

Gavin tried to stifle his laugh when he saw the present. "That's a souvenir from the LMC's gift shop! Lucky is a very popular mascot to the company. Our gift shop sells various different plushy versions of your cat."

Ves picked up the cheap plushy with a dubious expression. "Come on, Lucky. A doll can never replace you! Hasn't it been long enough? It's my birthday!"

"Meow!" Lucky thumped his tail against the table.

He sighed. "Fine. You win. I'll take you on some tasting tours once we visit Bentheim and the Centerpoint System."

#### **Chapter 1249 Watchful MTA**

Ves stood up when everyone had taken their seats. Although the plushy doll of Lucky in front of his table made for an unusual sight, the birthday boy himself looked unusually solemn at this moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for attending my birthday party. It gladdens my heart to receive the appreciation of so many people. Even though I wanted to keep this occasion modest, it's still a welcome surprise to me that so many of you insisted on coming."

All these people hadn't necessarily come because they were friends with Ves. Aside from Raella, Charlotte and a few others, the overwhelming majority chose to come because they wanted to forge a closer relationship with a young and promising Journeyman.

That was okay. Ves knew that aside from celebrating a turning point in his life, his birthday party had also turned into a networking opportunity of sorts. The

peace offering from Madame Catelyn Ricklin showcased how much his value rose due to his advancement.

Ves always suspected that the Ricklin Family sent assassins after him. Now that they deliberately sent a representative to his birthday party, his suspicion grew stronger.

For what reason would the Ricklins want to convey the intention to make peace after so many years of no contact?

While he didn't like the Ricklins at all, there was no point for Ves to pursue them any further. He lived in a different world now, and he knew that intensifying hostilities against one of the largest producers of affordable processors and chips in the Bright Republic was a bad idea.

"Five years ago when I started on this career, I never thought I would come this far. As many of you are no doubt aware of, I have not excelled very much at all when I studied at Rittersberg."

He couldn't help but glance towards Patricia, who nodded faintly at his words. His unremarkable performance back then contrasted sharply against her exceptional grades. No matter what kind of challenges they encountered in their studies, Patricia always seemed at least three steps ahead.

"However, nothing in life is set in stone. Through chance, hard work and a lot of risk taking, I've managed to seize several opportunities to climb ahead. Reaching Journeyman so soon is a gratifying result, but that had never been my end goal! From the very start, I have always set my sights higher! Journeyman is not the end of the road!"

Everyone clapped as they agreed with his words. Ves already demonstrated his potential, causing everyone to treat him as a future Senior rather than just a Journeyman.

As for reaching Master? No one except for maybe Ketis seriously believed he could reach that height. Almost no Master emerged from the Bright Republic since the founding of the state.

"Today, we are not only celebrating my birthday, but also celebrating the founding of the LMC. I am gratified to see my mech company ascend to the height it has achieved today. I believe it has been successful in helping me spread my principles concerning mechs. With its promising growth prospects, I am confident that my mechs will spread in every corner of the star sector and beyond!"

That aroused another round of clapping. Compared to the mechs designed by other mech designers, the products sold by the LMC were very distinctive. Not only did Ves exhibit a flair for designing a visually distinctive mech design, but all of his mechs also contained a remarkable quality that inspired courage and passion!

His designs slowly became known for this seemingly unique ability! Although it didn't enhance the battle performance of his mechs in a material fashion, the effect it had on morale was very outsized!

The mech pilots and their allies all gained more confidence and assurance in his products. Those on the opposite side often dreaded facing the mechs!

Due to these abnormal reactions from both sides, the side which fielded the LMC's mechs sometimes managed to pull off a victory they ordinarily wouldn't have won! Stories like this began to circulate through the galactic net in an increasing frequency, showcasing how much the LMC's customers appreciated their mechs!

All of this led to a lot of gratification to Ves. To see thousands of mech pilots begin to change their mentality towards mechs so that they fell more in line

with his overarching principles meant his mission to change the mech landscape was slowly making progress.

"When I initially embarked on this career, I felt that mechs were not being appreciated enough. They are too ubiquitous and though we call this era the Age of Mechs, I saw that mechs could use a lot more appreciation from their mech pilots. For this reason, I founded the Living Mech Corporation. Since the very start, I aimed to design and sell mechs that came alive in the hands of my customers. Considering my company's explosive rise and glowing testimonials of its products, I think I'm well on my way to providing fantastic machines to everyone who agrees with my principles!"

This aroused a loud round of cheers! Most people present saw a lot of promise in the LMC. They were jealous of the people and entities who owned shares in the company, because the value of the company was set to balloon in the coming years!

Ves wrapped up his speech to allow everyone to dig in. The tables had been filled with exotic dishes featuring various specialties of different states. Some of them were so rare that the guests couldn't help but grab at them first!

While others like Ketis immediately began to pig out, Ves leaned back on his chair and took it easy. To an unsophisticated eater like him, he was already content with eating nutrient packs.

As the man of the hour, he instead spent most of his time engaged in conversation.

"So what exactly is your position within the MTA, Charlotte?" Ves curiously asked.

"I'm a probationary recruit of sorts." She answered. "The MTA is different from the CFA in that the former is much more open to diversity within their ranks. Whereas the CFA wants to transform everyone into what they consider to be



ideal spacers, the MTA embraces the differences between star sectors and galactic regions. This is also why they are more open about recruiting mech pilots from the Bright Republic. The CFA would never do something like that. They strongly believe that your starting point already determines your upper ceiling."

In other words, the CFA rigidly adhered to class differences while the MTA were more proactive to offering opportunities towards the disadvantaged. This was just one aspect in which they clashed.

Ves himself already encountered the strong bias against space peasants when he initially tried to get inside the Starlight Megalodon. He learned first-hand that the CFA mainly recruited from the families of existing CFA personnel or from the elite spaceborn clans who eschewed living on planets entirely.

Those who didn't enjoy such a heritage had to pass an inhumanly high bar of tests to even be considered by the CFA!

If the MTA adopted the same recruitment standards as the CFA, then they would have never recruited Charlotte.

"Are there many mech pilots like you in the MTA?"

She nodded. "A lot. They're probationary recruits like me who are being intensely trained. In order for us to qualify for first-class mechs, we need to undergo rigorous training, several augmentation procedures and other stuff that I can't mention. Suffice to say, most probationary recruits can't keep up and wash out. Those who persevere will eventually become a proper member of the MTA. Once that happens, they'll be able to stand equal to mech pilots born from the galactic center!"

"You seem pretty relaxed for a probationary recruit." Ves noted her confident and relaxed demeanor. That was not the attitude of a struggling mech pilot. "You even have the time to catch up to my birthday party."

Charlotte smirked. "I've already gotten over most of the hurdles. I'll probably be promoted from my probationary status soon. The MTA doesn't recruit mech pilots at random, you know. They keep tabs on every mech cadet and mech pilot and employ a sophisticated analysis to find out which ones can adjust well to their training program."

It sounded as if the MTA deliberately recruited from a wider pool of people because they were aiming for something specific.

"To be honest, the MTA suggested that I catch up with you today." She continued. "I originally didn't hear about your celebration at all before my instructor approached me during training. The Bright Republic's branch of the MTA is quite interested in you. From what I can guess, your design philosophy is something really radical."

Ves looked up sharply at that. He had always been rather secretive about his design philosophy.

Yet as he began to grow stronger in his abilities, the special nature of his specialty became increasingly more prominent. Perhaps many people would still have doubts about the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord, but there was no ambiguity at all when he designed his last two mechs!

In hindsight, Ves had definitely overdone the X-Factor of his Aurora Titan and Transcendent Messenger designs!

Yet even if he exposed more than he initially intended, Ves really didn't like to restrain himself. In order for him to develop his design philosophy, he constantly needed to explore and expand his limits. He couldn't do so if he deliberately crippled the X-Factor of his mechs all the time!

"What does the MTA specifically think about my design philosophy?" He asked.

Charlotte shrugged. "The MTA has a way of categorizing the huge variety of design philosophies that mech designers come up with. For example, a Class II design philosophy is offense-oriented while a Class III design philosophy is defense-oriented. Yours is rather unusual because the Association's mech designers tentatively judged that your design philosophy falls into Class IX."

"What does it mean for my design philosophy to be categorized into Class IX?"

"Class IX is pretty much the leftover category. That's where design philosophies end up if they don't fit into the more conventional classes. The common theme of every Class IX design philosophy is that they are embarking on something so unusual that they are much tougher to realize. That means that mech designers like you are much less likely to advance to Master!"

It was quite a shock to Ves to hear these theories!

Yet after he thought about it, this perspective made a lot of sense. Mech designers who developed plainer design philosophies such as Master Olsen and Professor Ventag could depend on a vast body of research on related subjects to advance their own understanding.

As for Ves, he was pursuing something so strange and unique that he was completely dependent on performing his own research and experiments to progress! This was the disadvantage of pioneering a completely new field!

He quickly calmed down, though. "Even if my path is harder than the alternatives, I don't believe I'll fail. I will do my very best to push my design philosophy to a greater height!"

"The MTA is hoping for that as well. Although Class IX design philosophies are the least likely to reach Master-level, the few that do often lead to pivotal changes. The fact that your mechs are already very strong in expressing the unique qualities of your design philosophy is a very encouraging sign. That's all I know. I'm sure you'll get to hear more when you visit the sector headquarters."

Ves nodded in thanks to Charlotte for informing him about the MTA's interest in him. Although he felt slightly concerned that the MTA might want to ask some uncomfortable questions about his design philosophy, he was confident he could deflect them. He wasn't called the Devil Tongue for nothing!

The banquet proceeded with a lot of mingling. Aside from talking to Charlotte, Ves also made sure to spare some attention to his other guests such as the Ylvainan businessman and even Yoni Ricklin.

#### **Chapter 1250 Looking Forward**

The rest of the evening proceeded harmoniously and without any incident. By the time the celebrations came to a close, Ves stepped outside the banquet hall and stood next to the immense feet of the Aurora Titan installed as a temporary display model.

Standing in such close proximity to his impressive mech left a strong and profound impression to the visitors who were about to depart.

Ves greeted and shook hands with each person who left.

"Thank you for the mug, Raella. I'll be sure to return the favor! Tell Melinda I love her and her present!"

"It's nice to get in touch with you again, Charlotte. Good luck with your career within the MTA!"

"I hope you enjoy your stay in the Bright Republic, James. Ylvainans like you are the future of the Protectorate."

After the long row of guests each received some well wishes from Ves, his grandfather finally received his own turn.

"You've grown a lot, Ves." He smiled in a way only a grandfather could towards his grandson. "I'm so proud of you, and your father would be proud of you as well."

"One of the reasons why I'm working so hard is to save my father. I still have a long way to go before I'm powerful enough to make a difference."

Both of them sighed and looked sad. Their mood always plunged when they talked about the missing Larkinson.

"Ves.. please don't take this the wrong way, but slow down. Don't take too many risks. You've already achieved a lot of success, but it's only going to get harder from here. Your father wants you to be happy and safe. He would never want you to wear yourself out and ruin everything you've achieved just to save his life. If it comes down to it, he would definitely sacrifice his life in order to protect you from the dangers you've incurred!"

Although his grandfather's advice was very pertinent, Ves already threw it out of his mind. Slow down? Take less risks? As if!

"I will be sure to keep your words in mind." Ves lied.

"There's also something else you should know, Ves. The previous war ended early for a very good reason. While I don't know much and I'm not at liberty to divulge what little I do know, I think the Bright Republic might get swept up in something very dangerous in the future. In light of this, I think you should prepare for the worst and prepare a number of contingency plans in case your facility here on Cloudy Curtain is destroyed."

Ves frowned. He hadn't put much thought about this looming threat. The few people that knew more all kept their knowledge to themselves.

"Is it that bad, grandpa?"

"I don't know. It might be something that can ruin the Bright Republic, but it can also be something that will sweep past us without paying us any mind. All I can say is that it is best to have a Plan B in reserve so that you won't end up starting from scratch in case your assets are ruined."

Ves tapped the side of his head. "Don't worry, grandpa. My most valuable asset is my ability to design mechs. As a Journeyman, its value has skyrocketed. As long as my mind is sound, I'll always be able to rebuild no matter where I end up. Even so, the LMC already has some plans in mind to diversify its operations."

Aside from investing in the joint venture based in the Ylvaine Protectorate, the LMC might expand to other states in the future. Ves did not want to be limited to the Bright Republic and had always insisted on expanding his reach.

With the authorizations and permissions he received from the Tovar Family, the LMC faced fewer hurdles than before.

Before his grandfather left for the shuttle that would take him back to orbit, he shared one more word of advice. "One more thing, Ves. Although you're old enough to decide on how you live your own life, don't pour every moment of your life into work. Although you've achieved a lot of success, what is the point of working so hard if you don't get to enjoy it? Take it easy and find a girlfriend! I hope to meet my great-grandchildren at some point!"

His grandfather chuckled as he left Ves with those words. For his part, Ves didn't dismiss them as readily as Benjamin's previous advice.

"I really should get a girlfriend maybe." He sighed as he watched his grandfather and the others board their shuttles and depart from the Mech Nursery.

His brief reunion with Patricia made him realize that other people were already taking their next steps in their lives. His work was no excuse for him to avoid his love life.

The only problem was that he didn't have a woman in mind right now. If Ves wanted to pursue a serious relationship, he really needed to find someone who he clicked with. For someone as paranoid as him, he wanted to share his life with someone he trusted.

Although he didn't insist on it, he wanted his partner to be a mech designer as well. If the two of them shared the same profession and rank, they could open themselves up to each other on a deeper level.

Where could he find a woman like that in the galaxy?

"Ves!" Ketis walked up to him in her lavish red dress while hugging Lucky.

"This was a nice evening. I think your birthday party is a definite success!"

"Meow."

"See? Even Lucky agrees!"

Ves smiled sardonically at her. "Lucky is merely reminding me of my promise to him. Exotics is all he cares about."

"Really? How can you even tell that? All I hear from Lucky are meows!"

"I just have a way with animals I guess. Perhaps that's my true superpower."

Ketis slapped his side with her palm. "Oh, you! Don't joke about that! I'm sure that Journeyman like you are hiding something good from us lesser mech designers. I'll find out the truth myself when I advance!"

"It's hard to become a Journeyman, you know. Don't take me as a typical example. I'm a very big exception to the rule."

Although exceptions always existed, the majority of mech designers who advanced to Journeyman had already reached their middle or later years.

That wasn't as bad as it sounded like, because once they reached this height, their ability to make money increased drastically. Once they worked hard for a couple of decades, they could afford to extend their lives by a century, giving them a lot more time to bloom.

Even so, Ves did not want Ketis to turn old when she reached that point. Journeyman who advanced in their later years often didn't exhibit the amount of enthusiasm and drive towards becoming a Senior.

"I've always told you not to treat me like a kid anymore." Ketis whined. "I'm constantly catching up to you. I'm already making brisk progress in designing my new variant."

"Oh? Which base model is your variant based upon?"

"It's a secret." She grinned.

Ketis refused to divulge the details of the variant she had in store, so they quickly moved on to another topic.

"You're about to go on a really important trip soon, right?"

"Yep." He nodded. "A Journeyman is a lot more significant than a Novice or Apprentice. That's why it's not enough to visit their smaller branches in the Bright Republic. For a mech designer like me to visit the sector headquarters is both a pilgrimage and an implicit oath of subservience."

No matter how great mech designers thought of themselves, the MTA wanted to make sure they didn't forget who was truly in charge.

"About this visit, Ves, I'm thinking of sitting out this time."

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow. Although he hadn't addressed this topic with her, he always assumed she would tag along. "I thought that you'd be



interested in seeing the sights. The Centerpoint System is one of the most prosperous star systems in the star sector."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm definitely interested." She said with a serious expression. "However, seeing you celebrate your success today made me realize that I really need to step up my game. You work so hard all day and rarely take the time to relax and enjoy a day off. How can I do any less if I want to reach Journeyman within a decade? I think I need to devote all my time to my design work in order to make a lot of progress."

He hadn't expected such a strong level of dedication from Ketis. Although he was slightly concerned that she would wear herself out by engaging in mech design all day, he was very gratified at her dedication.

"If that's your choice, then by all means stay. Just make sure to pace yourself." He said encouragingly.

Ves and Ketis craned their heads upwards as they witnessed all the shuttles lifting off into the air. The Aurora Titan behind their backs enveloped both of them with its homely and welcoming aura.

The birthday party came to an end. As an army of cleaning bots descended from the ceiling to clean up the entire banquet hall, Ves began to cast his gaze beyond the present.

"What is next?"

Aside from visiting the sector headquarters, Ves also remembered that he promised to pay a visit to Master Olson.

"She'll probably expect me to accept an assignment."

As long as it didn't take him away from home for too long, he was fine with whatever she had in store for him.

Even though he hadn't derived that much benefit out of his apprenticeship to Master Olson, he always enjoyed the implicit protection of this status.

Although the umbrella he was taking shelter under wasn't very big compared to the ones she bestowed to her core disciples, it was better than nothing.

The more he enjoyed her appreciation, the greater her support. Ves already understood Master Olson adhered to the principle of equal exchange.

This meant that if Ves wanted to expand his umbrella, he needed to work for it. Right now, Ves possessed too many sensitive secrets such as his design philosophy. If he wanted to fend off the MTA's inquiries into his specialty, then being able to invoke Master Olson's protection was a big convenience.

"Heh. I'm basically treating my Master as a shield at this point."

He couldn't help it. With the System, Ves didn't have much use for Master Olson's tutelage. Even the access to additional sources of knowledge that she provided hadn't been very relevant to him lately.

"Well, I'll see what my Master has in store once I meet her again."

Night fell over the Mech Nursery as Ves turned in for the night.

The next day, Ves woke up refreshed and content. After wearing his smart clothing in a different but still luxurious configuration, he entered his penthouse office.

Some of his presents he received last night now resided on his desk. Ves filled up his Devil Tongue mug with coffee as he admired his grandfather's prosperity tree placed next to Melinda's Planetary Guard mech figurine.

"This tree is a little weird."

It looked similar to a bonsai tree. When Ves read up on prosperity trees, he found out that they originated from an odd planet in the New Rubarth Empire.

Prosperity trees emerged from a mutation due to the anomalous circumstances of its origin. They were very difficult to grow as most seeds failed to sprout.

The few that did experienced incredibly slow growth. If nothing exceptional happened, the prosperity tree on his desk would never be able to grow large enough to overtake his desk.

"However, there's an exception."

On rare occasions, a prosperity tree might enter into a sudden growth spurt! Although many exobotanists tried to figure out the cause behind such an abrupt switch, they still hadn't been able to explain the reason for this transition.

As a result, the Rubarthans started to consider prosperity trees as a symbol of fortune.

"Is this really true?" Ves frowned at the tree while holding his steamy mug.

He sensed nothing remarkable about this tree. His senses didn't detect any remarkable spirituality from the little growth.

"Perhaps it's all superstition." He muttered.