

### Chapter 1251 Inconsistency

Later that day, Ves was about to leave his office in order to resume the fabrication of his gold label Aurora Titans. He still had a number of outstanding orders to fulfill before he departed to the Centerpoint System.

He took one more look at the other sentimental gifts he received before he left.

A small display had been added near his desk which showcased the gifts he valued. He picked up Lanie's handknit shawl from one of the shelves and contemplated wearing it for his upcoming trip.

"Hm, it's too fragile, but then again, it's meant to be used."

Whenever he designed and produced his mechs, he wanted them to be used for their intended purpose. It was fine for his more impressive mechs to be put on display in a museum or exhibition hall, but that should be the exception, not the rule.

Ves did not want to be regarded as someone who was limited to designing pretty-looking but useless machines.

In the end, he loosely draped the shawl over his neck. Its fabric was dyed in dark blue which was one of the distinctive colors of the Larkinson Family.

"It's kind of comfy."

Ves liked it so much that he planned to see if he could apply some treatments to increase its durability and protect it from degrading when exposed to rough environments.

After that, he picked up the nutrient pack that James claimed to be a replica of the one which the great prophet once consumed.

"This nutrient pack..."

As Ves held the simple packaging, he felt a little odd about its texture. It didn't feel like a brand new nutrient pack to him. It was as if it was just as old as the holy relic.

He frowned. A nutrient pack aficionado like him should have been able to estimate the real age of the nutrient packs he held.

The packaging of a nutrient pack was virtually the same for thousands of years. Humanity spent thousands of years perfecting the most efficient formula for the wrappers.

It needed to be resilient enough to protect its contents from background radiation. However, it also needed to be biodegradable upon tearing it open. Otherwise, the galaxy would have already turned into a giant trash heap of nutrient packs!

The result that humanity came up with was a formula for packaging that promised to protect the integrity of its contents for tens of thousands of years, but no longer.

"Nutrient packs don't need to be stored that long in the first place."

In truth, the packaging already started degrading by the time they rolled off the production lines. The process just took an extremely long time. Only upon tearing open the wrapper would the process truly kick in and decay the leftovers at a rapid pace.

After recalling all of this, Ves viewed the Ylvainan nutrient pack with more suspicion. "If this wrapping is the exact same as the others, then it's several centuries old!"

It could be that the manufacturers of this nutrient pack had tweaked the formula of its packaging in order to give it that holy relic feel.

However, it was not so simple to age the packaging of a nutrient pack. Having owned a lot of vintage nutrient packs before, he learned what it was like to hold a nutrient pack that was aged for thousands of years.

"This pack feels too authentic. It doesn't feel fake."

Ves studied the nutrient pack with his full attention. After brushing his hands all over the rectangular brown-green packaging, his fingers finally identified an irregularity.

"There's a small square of material here that doesn't feel as aged as the rest of the packaging."

After brushing at it with his nail, he managed to peel off a thin layer camouflaged as the same material as the nutrient pack.

A folded piece of synthetic paper hid underneath. When Ves picked it up and unfolded it, he began to read the message handwritten onto its surface.

[Mr, Larkinson, I apologise for the misdirection. I doubted I would have received a normal welcome if I revealed my true identity. Hence why I resorted to this means in order to reveal the truth.

This is something you should really consider doing more yourself. The lies you peddle will continue to corrode your heart. The only way you can cleanse your consciousness is to come clean.

Ah, what am I writing? You are set in your ways. I doubt my advice will ever find purchase in your mind. Your stubbornness is both your greatest strength and your fatal flaw.

I must say that it has been an enlightening experience for me to meet with the designer of the Transcendent Messenger. The Komodo Star Sector is lucky to host a unique mech designer like you who wishes to transform the galactic mech industry.

I am thankful for the changes you've sparked within the Ylvaine Protectorate. While many Ylvainans are comfortable by remaining insular, the rest of the galaxy will not be content to leave them alone. If we are to survive the coming perils, we need to stop digging our heads into the ground.

We will meet again someday. The Bright Republic is about to experience great changes and so will the Ylvaine Protectorate. No matter what difficult circumstances you find yourself in, I hope that you will not refuse my offer to repay the favor that you've bestowed to us. The Ylvaine Dynasty is always willing to assist the Bright Martyr when needed.]

Ves felt like puking blood when he read and reread the message. He'd been fooled!

"Businessman, my butt! James Immel is the next living prophet!"

He didn't realize the Ylvainan's true identity yesterday! Although the man did his best to hide his inherent charisma underneath his robe, Ves already felt as if he was in the company of someone remarkable!

"If the original Prophet Ylvaine was like this guy, then it's no wonder he managed to found a new religion!"

This newer version of the prophet was a lot more charming than the one that came before. The prophet who immolated himself at the end of the tribunal came across as a delusional madman more than anything else.

"Either the new living prophet's genes have been tweaked or he'll eventually degrade over time." Ves guessed.

Still, he really wanted to smack himself with his palm. He should have noticed the clues, from the odd arrival of an Ylvainan to his birthday party to the strange discrepancy he felt from the nutrient pack wrapper.

Ves realized now that the nutrient pack that the new living prophet gifted him was authentic. If his guess was right, the nutrient pack he held right now belonged to the same production batch as the one that the original Prophet Ylvaine used to consume!

The Ylvainans must have preserved the rest of the crate of nutrient packs once Prophet Ylvaine departed from the ship or something.

"Damn. Is this a hot potato?"

Even though Ves managed to get acquitted for ruining a holy relic, he still felt uneasy about owning a precious nutrient pack like this. There shouldn't be that many intact nutrient packs from the same batch left.

"Well.. what's the harm? Nobody will notice."

He briefly considered storing it in his vault, but a small part of him wanted to flaunt this remarkable possession. He eventually decided to put it back on the shelf of the display. Perhaps he could use it to tell a story the next time he entertained a visitor in his office.

When Ves left his office, he began to return to his previous routine of fabricating the remaining gold label Aurora Titans.

While he felt a bit peeved about having to delay his trip to Centerpoint in order to meet this obligation, he knew that it would do a lot of good down the line. His gold label mechs had always been his most impressive works, and putting more of them in the wild helped expand his presence.

"If only every mech of mine is as strong as one of my gold label mechs."

Talking with Charlotte yesterday made him realize why his design philosophy seemed so abnormal to others.

Ves had witnessed the design philosophies of several Seniors. From the Skull Architect to Professor Ventag, all the mechs designed by Seniors possessed roughly the same degree of influence of their designers.

The mechs that Ves designed differed from this pattern. The special strength they carried did not come from Ves alone.

As soon as Ves began to incorporate external spiritual fragments into his designs, the degree of influence he exerted on them had grown out of proportion!

"By relying on borrowed strength, I'm able to punch above my weight!"

This was a very important realization. None of the other mech designers he met did anything like it. They all relied on their design seeds or whatever they turned into when they advanced to Senior to bestow their designs with their metaphysical strength!

"However, even if their designs aren't as flashy as mine, they are a lot more consistent."

Ves noticed that the qualities they managed to impart to their mechs were very contained.

This was different to Ves, because his design philosophy mainly focused on the X-Factor, which was inherently volatile.

As a result, Ves could only display his full potential when he fabricated a mech in person. The mechs fabricated by the LMC or third party manufacturers would always be a pale shell compared to the most authentic copies.

Ves used to think that this wasn't a big deal. The benefit his lesser mechs provided to its mech pilots was already good enough.

"Yet am I really content with this result?"

If he had a choice, then he would rather have every copy exhibit the same degree of X-Factor as his best works.

"I can't see how this can be done." He muttered to himself.

Yet just because he couldn't figure out the answer right now didn't mean it was impossible. As long as he worked hard and experimented a lot, he might be able to solve this huge shortcoming.

"Maybe this is what keeps most higher-ranking mech designers occupied. They're all trying to find a way to strengthen or widen the application of their design philosophies."

Ves knew that he needed to put a huge amount of time and effort in order to even come close to an answer to this profound problem. The amount of research and experiments he needed to perform might take years or decades.

Yet all of that was worth it if he managed to succeed!

"It makes a huge difference if I can equalize this quality to all of my mechs!"

Perhaps achieving such a drastic improvement was the key to advancing to Senior or Master.

"Mech designers are all people who are constantly trying to turn the impossible into the possible. They are all pioneering their own dreams."

Ves already started innovating from the start. His design philosophy was so out of whack that he had been treading his own path since the System first pushed him into studying the X-Factor phenomenon.

His visit to Centerpoint would definitely illuminate his path. Not only did it host the sector headquarters of the MTA, but it was also home to the largest concentration of mech designers in the star sector!

The star system was host to many services catered to mech designers. Not only that, but Centerpoint offered lots of opportunities to mingle and exchange ideas with fellow mech designers.

"It truly is the holy land of mech designers in the Komodo Star Sector!"

Ves felt a bit regretful that Ketis declined to travel with him this time. He was sure that she would be able to learn a lot when exposed to so many mech designers.

"Then again, she's not like the other orthodox mech designers. Maybe she's afraid she'll expose her unconventional origins."

In any case, Ves did not share the same concerns, so he was definitely looking forward to meeting other mech designers from different backgrounds!

"Who knows, maybe I can find a girlfriend there."

#### **Chapter 1252 Black Market Manufacturers**

Ves completed his work at the Mech Nursery in quick order.

Aside from fulfilling all the orders for the gold label Aurora Titans, he fabricated two extra copies. He transferred one copy to the Avatars of Myth and the other one to the LMC to be used as a display model.

This time, Ves would be traveling aboard the Barracuda as always.

Although the Centerpoint System should be safe, the trip to and from the center of the star sector wasn't risk-free.

Considering the low odds of requiring a landbound mech escort, Melkor opted to prioritize spaceborn mechs over landbound mechs for this journey.

The Avatars of Myth were still in the process of raising a spaceborn mech company, so they did not have that many spaceborn mechs on hand.

However, Melkor did the best he could to prepare for this trip. He managed to



scrounge up eight spaceborn mechs and mech pilots to accompany Ves to Centerpoint.

"We've charted the fastest and safest route from Bentheim to Centerpoint." Captain Silvestra said as Ves boarded his corvette. "A lot of trade flows from Bentheim to Centerpoint, so the most direct port systems and stopover systems have long been cleared of any pirates and other impediments."

That made sense. "How long will it take to reach Centerpoint?"

"Not that long due to all of the port systems allowing us to make huge hops. If the gravitic tides are favorable, we can reach the system in six weeks. If not, two months. Mind you, we can go faster if you decide to leave the Greenfeather behind. Although the light carrier is fairly fast for her class, she's still a snail compared to the Barracuda."

"Acceptable. Please make sure to prepare the Barracuda for the long journeys ahead. We might remain outside the Bright Republic for an extended year of time depending on the commitments I take on at Centerpoint or Leemar."

The Barracuda and the Greenfeather both jumped from Cloudy Curtain to Bentheim without any issue.

Only a handful of companions accompanied him for this journey.

Lucky tagged along because he expected Ves to spoil him with exotics.

Gavin naturally followed Ves along as his executive assistant.

Ketis already notified him of her intention to remain at the Mech Nursery in order to design her first variant.

Leland couldn't do anything in Centerpoint and the Friday Coalition. Instead, he devoted a lot of his attention to rooting out spies and informers within the company.

After all, Flashlight firmly considered the LMC to be their turf. How could they tolerate other spies snooping around in their backyard?

"At least he's useful for something." Ves muttered.

He quickly noticed Ketis' absence. Her enthusiasm, passion and cheer always brightened up his day. Now that he had separated from her, Ves found his days to be bland, as Lucky didn't want to play with him and Gavin was more of a butler than a friend most of the time.

His listless Spirituality didn't help either. His mind only replenished his empty tank a little bit in the past couple of weeks. While he expected his depleted spiritual energy to recover by a third by the time he reached Centerpoint, that was still a distance away from full recovery.

"I really need to find a way to fill up my tank faster."

Once the Barracuda stopped over to Bentheim, Ves spent some days on the busy planet under escort. He took Lucky around some exotic materials markets and visited several exhibition halls to view some noteworthy mechs.

Sadly, his plan to see if he could siphon the spiritual accumulation from the mechs on display faltered. While he identified several mechs that accumulated a significant amount of spiritual accumulation, it was simply too heterogeneous.

When Ves attempted to take the spiritual accumulation and see if he could extract any useful spiritual energy out of it, he hadn't found a single compatible attribute.

"It's like digging up a random clump of dirt and expecting to find a trace of exotics!"

While Ves found it fascinating that certain mechs could accumulate spirituality as well, their degree of heterogeneity essentially meant that all of it was junk to him.

Though experimenting with clumps of spiritual accumulation taken from dozens of impressive display mechs, Ves made an important observation.

It appeared that his spiritual attribute was extremely specific to him. Perhaps every mech designer developed a unique attribute. He guessed that it might be related to the design philosophy locked within the design seed of a mech designer.

"That's a bummer."

It meant that for now, Ves saw no possible way for him to replenish his spiritual energy faster. He couldn't plunder it from external sources because their attributes simply didn't match. He could only rely on the natural regeneration of his mind.

Due to this setback, his trip to Bentheim mostly devolved into a culinary trip for Lucky. The pair visited a bunch of shops and marketplaces which sold a variety of exotics shipped from the frontier or other states.

"Another billion credits down the drain." Ves sighed.

He bought enough exotics to keep Lucky's tummy content for a couple months.

At least his cat stopped treating him as a pariah.

"The way to Lucky's heart is through his stomach, it seems."

"Meow!"

Before he departed to Centerpoint, Ves took the time to stop by the office of one of his business partners.

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to catch up to your birthday." Marcella said as she greeted Ves in her office. "I've been preoccupied with a problem that's becoming an increasingly bigger problem for the LMC."

Ves didn't have to think too long to figure it out. "Copycats."

"Yes. A lot of unscrupulous mech designers see you making a killing by selling expensive mechs. While the margins of the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord aren't as good as before, they're still hefty enough to attract the attention of dozens of greedy underground mech manufacturers."

The damage these copycats mechs did to the LMC was considerable. While the imitation mechs mostly looked identical to the originals, their quality often fell short. The sloppy production processes also left numerous flaws behind in each copycat Blackbeak, Crystal Lord or Aurora Titan.

Yet despite all these faults, mech buyers who were short on money still bought them anyway because they were considerably cheaper than the authentic versions!

The worst part about this copycat situation was that the black market mechs often retained at least some X-Factor of the original design! As long as the black market manufacturer didn't mess with the original design schematics, they could still replicate some of their distinctive charm!

"We can't eliminate copycats and imitations entirely." Marcella said grimly. "As long as your mechs remain attractive products, there will always be someone with a production facility who wants to cash in on your success."

"What have you done then to mitigate this problem?"

"Most of the copycats originate from the Reinald Republic."

"How come that doesn't surprise me? Of course the Reinaldians are at the center of this operation."

Ves recalled the time he encountered an illicit copy of his own mech in one of the marketplaces in the Harkensen System.

"While it's impossible for us to stop the Reinaldians from producing copycats of your mechs, we can still request the more established players from doing so. That will cut down on the amount of copycat mechs in circulation. The reason why I couldn't make it to your birthday celebration was because I was stuck in the Harkensen System cutting a deal between the LMC and the three largest underground mech manufacturers."

"What does the deal entail?"

"In exchange for paying them a considerable amount of money, they promise not to produce copycat mechs based on our mechs."

Ves felt like puking blood. "What?! They're demanding bribes?!"

"There's no other recourse we can take, Ves. The Reinaldan authorities won't do anything to stop their illicit activities. The only way we can achieve actual change is by giving in. These black market manufacturers have made similar deals with countless other mech designers. It's probably their main source of revenue at this point."

"What a ridiculous extortion racket! Why hasn't the MTA cracked down on this practice?"

Marcella shrugged. "The black market manufacturers are quite elusive. They fabricate the mechs in decommissioned factory ships and logistic ships. Trying to hunt them down is like trying to chase after rats. The problem is too tedious. Even if the MTA succeeds in taking some of them down, more will pop up afterwards."

"The MTA has grown lazier and lazier by the day. There are so many problems in this star sector, but they've been holing up in their strongholds for decades."

"You can't blame them, Ves. On a philosophical level, deviant behavior like this will always take place. It's a force of nature that can't be stopped no matter how hard the MTA enforces their rules. I think they made the conscious decision to let such activities take place as long as they don't displace the legal market for mechs. The existence of copycat mechs also helps to pressure complacent mech designers."

The existence of copycat mechs essentially served as an indirect form of arbitrage. The more copycat mechs that emerged, the greater the pressure for the mech company to reduce its prices.

This fell in line with the aims of the MTA. They always encouraged competition in the mech market whenever possible.

As Marcella explained what she managed to accomplish, Ves didn't feel so repulsive of her actions. While the LMC was on the hook for several hundred million credits a year, the black market manufacturers she negotiated with held a lot of sway in their industry.

Not only did they promise to end their use of LMC's design, but they also promised to exert some pressure onto the smaller illicit manufacturers.

While some of the smaller fish would always continue to produce copycat mechs, at least they wouldn't be as pervasive as before.

"Mind you, the deal only addresses the production of copycats from the Reinald Republic." She cautioned him. "There are other centers of illicit mech production that might also decide to copycat your mechs in the star sector."

"And all of them will want a bribe as well to encourage them to stop imitating our mechs?"

"Yup."

"Scumbags!"

Ves considered these black market manufacturers to be vermin. Instead of investing their resources into developing their own mech designs, they would rather steal them from someone else! They did not deserve to profit from another mech designer's success!

"Stop moping, Ves. If there's one thing I've learned after spending decades building up my mech brokerage, it's that the mech market isn't fair. The MTA isn't doing anything about this practice because mech designers ought to be able to withstand this degree of adversity."

She was right. A mech company that was forced to shutter due to copycats shouldn't exist in the first place.

Once Ves learned all he wanted to know about the deal, he asked one more question.

"As you know, I'm about to depart to the Centerpoint System. Do you have any advice for me?"

"Not much. I haven't visited Centerpoint myself." Marcella replied. "I've heard that it is a central nexus for mech pilots and mech designers. Not only does the star system attract mech insiders from all over the star sector, but it's also home to many people who originate from other star sectors. The only problem is that the standard of living there is extremely high. Even visitors from the Friday Coalition will feel the pinch if they remain there for a couple of years."

As a star system directly controlled by the MTA, some of the planets and habitats in Centerpoint primarily catered to core internal MTA personnel. The living standard there came close to that of a first-rate superstate, but the downside to that was that even Ves with his flush bank account was nothing more than a pauper in these places!

Fortunately, Centerpoint offered several other places where space peasants still had a chance to live! Ves and Lucky didn't have to worry about starving to death if they stayed in the star system for a couple of weeks!

### **Chapter 1253 Design Philosophy Classifications**

Even though it was extremely expensive to live in the Centerpoint System, plenty of people managed to eke out a living anyway.

Some of the people who lived in the star system were either internal members of the MTA or family members of one. In fact, just like the Common Fleet Alliance, entire families or dynasties emerged who continually brought up descendents to work for the Mech Trade Association.

These were the most privileged residents of the star system. The money they earned from their service to the MTA came in the form of MTA credits.

Often called mech credits, they were almost identical to the CFA's fleet credits. It was as if the two organizations copied each other's homework.

A mech credit possessed an extremely high purchasing power even in the shops of the MTA. According to the current exchange rate, a single mech credit was worth around 3.6 billion bright credits!

"Damn! So high!" Ves cursed when he looked up the figures.

It was a humbling moment for Ves when he realized that his entire net worth only amounted to a handful of mech credits!

A typical internal MTA mech technician earned around 10 mech credits per month! That was a lot more than what most hard-working mech designers earned in their lifetimes!

The difference between the earning power of a citizen from the galactic rim and an internal member of the MTA was simply too vast!



Still, at least the MTA wasn't as insular as the CFA. People like Charlotte received an opportunity to prove themselves in order to enter their ranks. Once she passed her probationary period, she could expect to draw a salary of around 20 mech credits a month.

This was an insane amount of money, enough to make a lot of waves in the Bright Republic!

Naturally, because of their extremely high value, the MTA and CFA regulated their currencies quite strictly. It was a virtual currency that existed only in their central database, which meant that they tracked every transaction.

Overall, they did a pretty good job in preventing the wealthy citizens of the Centerpoint System from throwing the rest of the star sector in chaos.

"It's not completely foolproof, though."

There were means to convert fleet credits and mech credits into other currencies or valuable trade goods. However, doing this introduced a lot of other problems. Pirates loved to hijack shipments of trade goods worth billions of bright credits.

"It isn't worthwhile for them to meddle in the star sector anyway."

While it sounded as if every internal member of the MTA possessed an unimaginable amount of wealth, they could only earn this much because they were a lot more productive and capable than baseline humans.

From genetic optimization treatments to implants and augments, these people had to save thousands of mech credits to afford another upgrade.

Accumulating upgrades was one of the prerequisites to earning a promotion that allowed MTA personnel to climb higher in the ranks!

Better upgrades cost vastly more mech credits than ordinary ones, which meant that their upper classes had a much easier time remaining at the top than their rank and file.

In this way, the MTA managed to maintain social stability among their own members. Everyone who entered their ranks had a clear if difficult path to promotion. The rank and file was happy with any opportunity for upward mobility, while the upper ranks were content as well as they could use their abundant wealth to give their descendents a considerable head start.

"Naturally, there are always some who can't keep up and wash out."

The MTA paid a lot to its internal members, but demanded a lot in return as well. They didn't hesitate to kick out members who were slacking off or failed to meet the high standards of the Association.

From what Ves read on the galactic net, most of the internal members that the MTA fired usually left the Centerpoint System. Most migrated to the galactic heartland or other, more prosperous star sectors, while the least capable could only go as far as the Friday Coalition or the Hexadric Hegemony.

"In general, the MTA is pretty fair in this regard." Ves thoughtfully concluded.

The MTA constantly took in lucky new recruits from impoverished regions while kicking out the bums and incompetents from their ranks. This continuous movement of people kept the organization dynamic and more in touch with the people they protected.

This contrasted sharply with what he knew of the CFA. They were a lot more rigid and hierarchical. It was a lot more difficult for someone to obtain a higher class no matter how hard they worked. Space peasants could forget about entering their ranks!

While the CFA didn't exhibit much diversity as a result, they possessed a much stronger common identity. Everyone possessed the same background. They could all count on each other to think and perform in the same way.

Ves found it fascinating how the CFA and the MTA diverged in their thinking of this matter. From a broader perspective, their divergent human resource policies betrayed their stance towards the people they protected.

"While they are both smug and elitist, the CFA is a lot more contemptuous of space peasants than the MTA. At least the latter still consider themselves to be a part of humanity rather than standing above them. Sometimes, I wonder why they still bother to guard over human space."

He never looked that much into how the MTA was run. As part of the Big Two, the Association was unimaginably big and powerful. Ves never thought he could ever enter their vortex.

"It's different now."

The MTA cared a lot about mechs. As long as a mech pilot or mech designer excelled in mechs in any way, they became worthy of consideration.

In practice, that meant that every expert pilot and Journeyman Mech Designer could expect to obtain some benefits from them. Even if they weren't able to become internal members and earn a salary in mech credits, they could still enjoy some services as external members.

It was kind of like his current relationship with the Flashlight, now that Ves thought about it. Remaining in the periphery meant that while Ves wouldn't be able to enjoy a lot of benefits, he wouldn't be forced to follow the whims of these organizations either.

Considering his current situation, Ves preferred to keep a healthy distance from the MTA. While earning mech credits sounded really attractive, he valued his life and his freedom even more!

He also read up on how they regarded design philosophies. While the galactic net didn't offer that much information, he did find out a handy list of all the different classifications they came up with after several hundred years of refinement.

Class I: Whole performance, holistic, encompasses entire mechs.

Class II: Offense-oriented.

Class III: Defense-oriented.

Class IV: Mobility-oriented.

Class V: Endurance and efficiency-oriented.

Class VI: Focus on a narrow range of mech archetypes.

Class VII: Focus on a narrow range of mech designs.

Class VIII: Focus on a narrow range of tech, components or materials.

Class IX: Irregular, unorthodox, unconventional, special.

That last one stood out like a sore thumb. Ves suspected that they called Class IX design philosophies 'special' as a euphemism for something they considered stupid or unrealistic.

"It's like a lottery. Most mech designers with Class IX design philosophies don't make it out of Journeyman or Senior, but those that do often hit the jackpot because they're incredibly valuable at the Master-level!"

Once the MTA adopted this classification scheme, they performed a lot of research on how the different classes of design philosophies fared.

The MTA considered a design philosophy to achieve its culmination when its mech designer advanced to Master. Reaching Journeyman was just the bare minimum to enter into the organization's consideration.

As for Novices and Apprentices? There were so many of them that the MTA simply didn't bother to put them into consideration.

Overall, the most eye-catching observation was that mech designers who possessed Class VII design philosophies were the most likely to advance to Master!

While Ves already knew this fact, it still surprised him how much their odds improved. Mech designers who only designed a single mech and continuously iterated upon them were considered the oddballs of the mech industry.

They only designed a single mech in their entire lives!

Of course, just because they devoted all of their energy on one design didn't mean that mech remained the same. They continually upgraded their sole design with newer tech and finer application of knowledge. Sometimes, they even designed variants that could cope better in specific situations.

Still, the core of their design philosophy still rested in a single, specific mech design. Even if these extreme mech designers possessed the skill to design other mechs, they wholeheartedly refused to do so. For them, it was a matter of principle! The moment they designed another mech was the moment their design philosophy broke!

Therefore, even if Class VII mech designers boasted the most Masters, they also contributed the least to the development of mech design.

"While some of their innovations are universal, most of them are confined to a specific mech design."

Such Masters didn't leave much of a legacy behind. The only way their work remained relevant was if they raised an Apprentice who inherited the exact same design philosophy.

Opposite to Class VII design philosophies, the MTA regarded Class II, Class III, Class IV and Class V in a much better light.

The mech designers who possessed these design philosophies often came up with many useful innovations. Best of all, they were often universal, which meant that they could be applied to countless other mech designs.

"In fact, they are the principal source of many new technologies and techniques introduced in every new mech generation!"

Mech designers who possessed design philosophies that fell into this range enjoyed a greater amount of attention from the MTA.

Compared to Class VII mech designers who only dickered around with a single mech design, a typical Class II mech designer could pass on a lot more widely-applicable innovations!

Ves spared some thought about how Ketis fell into this classification scheme.

"She focuses on both sharpness and swordsman mechs, so her design philosophy can be classified as both Class II and Class VI."

However, the MTA refused to assign multiple classifications to a single design philosophy. In cases where multiple classifications were possible, the narrowest one applied.

In the case of Ketis, that meant her design philosophy primarily fell under Class VI.

"At least Class VI design philosophies aren't treated with contempt."

The innovations developed by a Class VI mech designer could still be applied to many mech designs that shared the same archetype.

Still, if Ves had a say in the matter, he would rather prefer that Ketis shift her design philosophy towards focusing on sharpness. Her obsession with

swordsman mechs forced her to split her attention, which meant she might not be able to accomplish anything in either areas.

"Still, she chose this path by herself. I shouldn't meddle with her decision."  
Ves shook his head.

Just because the MTA thought bad of something didn't mean that Ves should do the same.

"After all, my design philosophy has fallen under the 'special' class, which doesn't exactly enjoy the best reputation."

Class I and Class IX design philosophies were both special in that they were often compatible with many other design philosophies.

Ves already discovered that since his design philosophy focused on an aspect that almost no other mech designer thought about, he could collaborate with practically everyone!

This made it a lot easier for Class I and some Class IX mech designers to collaborate with other mech designers.

The downside was that because their design philosophies were so vague, radical and all-encompassing that their chances of advancing to Master was abysmal!

Too many Seniors who possessed these classes of design philosophies got stuck halfway and never found a way to step further.

Ves wasn't conceited enough to think he enjoyed smooth sailing. The same fate might befall him one day!

"I have to keep improving. I have to keep innovating. I have to keep challenging myself!"

## Chapter 1254 Galactic Citizen

Reading up on how the MTA classified and evaluated different design philosophies gave Ves a greater sense of his own worth.

"On one hand, I'm a Class IX mech designer."

Compared to the vast majority of more conventional mech designers, Ves was like the class clown. There was a large chance that he wouldn't amount to anything in the future, but there was always a tiny chance that he would accomplish something extremely remarkable!

"Sort of like what happens when the class clown starts a new company that becomes so successful that they've become a billionaire!"

Naturally, the odds of that happening was quite small that Class IX mech designers rightly deserved to be treated as clowns.

Even so, many Class IX mech designers still managed to advance to Senior. At that height, they were capable of providing a lot of modest enhancements to any mech design they contributed to. Class IX Seniors therefore gained a reputation as the 'best' assistants to Master Mech Designer looking to add some extra 'oomph' to their own work.

"Is that how Master Olson sees me? A future assistant with a very convenient design philosophy?"

Ves had mixed feelings about that. While he was fine with collaborating with other mech designers, he did not see much value in it if he was being relegated to the sides.

Only by being the lead designer of a design project would he be able to harvest the most gains! Not only would the finished design carry his vision and his design choices, he would also make a much greater impact on the lives of his customers!



Therefore, Ves did not accept this stereotype of Class IX mech designers! It completely went against his ambitions! Senior was not the end of the road for him! He was absolutely confident that he could make his design philosophy bloom and reach even greater heights!

Charlotte mentioned something very important during his birthday celebration.

She informed him that the MTA's resident mech designers in the Bright Republic paid a lot more attention to him than normal. The reason was because he expressed his design philosophy a lot stronger than others.

It was rather strange that the expression of his design philosophy fluctuated so strongly between different mechs and mech designs!

Ves knew that this was because he focused on the X-Factor, which was inherently volatile. However, a bigger factor was that he relied on external sources of strength to enhance his mech designs.

"The MTA will probably have a lot of questions in store for me when I arrive at Centerpoint. Questions that I really don't want to answer."

Yet would the MTA accept no for an answer? Likely not! They were one of the two most powerful organizations in human space! They wielded so much power that they could easily crush Ves like a bug! You didn't just say no to their requests!

Ves began to sweat a little as he began to see his upcoming visit to Centerpoint in another light.

Instead of seeing it as a supreme honor to get into closer contact with one of the core powers of the galaxy, he was actually entering the belly of a very dangerous beast!

He had various secrets that he really didn't want the MTA to find out. From possessing the Mech Designer System, his insights and applications of

spirituality and the secret behind the X-Factor, each of them could land him in hot water if exposed!

Although it sounded nice to become a galactic citizen and obtain recognition of his recent advancement, Ves preferred to pass over them entirely if it meant that he had an interrogation in store!

"There's no way the MTA is clueless! They have a copy of all of my design files and logs! Surely they've recognized something fishy about my designs!"

If Ves suddenly ordered the Barracuda and the Greenfeather to turn around and return to the Bright Republic, the MTA would certainly grow impatient with him. While the Association didn't set a firm time limit to their invitation, they nonetheless expected mech designers to answer their summons as promptly as possible!

For an intriguing case like Ves, that meant the MTA would definitely be willing to drag Ves to Centerpoint if he was being too tardy!

"Damnit! I can't delay this visit!" He cursed.

What did the MTA know? What did they suspect? Some of the smartest and most ingenious people in the galaxy work for them! With all of the tech and augmentations at their disposal, they were much sharper than the average baseline human.

To Ves, entering the sector headquarters was the same as entering a den filled with Calabasts!

Paranoia and worry began to plague his imagination as he envisioned himself being dragged into a high-tech interrogation chamber before being prodded to spill every little secret!

Even though it should have been unlikely for the MTA to treat a Journeyman so badly, Ves nonetheless couldn't rule out the possibility of this happening!

He only needed to slip up a single time before the MTA brought out the manacles!

"I can't let this happen!"

What could he do?

As soon as he calmed down a bit, he realized that he wasn't as hopeless as he thought. His earlier experiences in the Ylvaine Protectorate gave him several ideas on how to tackle this potential problem.

He grinned. If Class IX mech designers were seen as clowns, then he should do his best to reinforce this stereotype!

As the Barracuda and Greenfeather crossed through territories on their way to Centerpoint, Ves slowly refined his strategy towards any possible inquiries he might face upon arrival.

Perhaps Ves was being too paranoid. Perhaps he was worrying too much. Yet the prospect of facing difficult questions haunted him so much that he wasn't content unless he accounted for every possibility!

The MTA may be the holy land for mech designers, but as far as Ves was concerned, it was a pit of darkness that could swallow him up as long as he took a single wrong step!

Still, as long as he managed to make it out of their sector headquarters, he should be in the clear. Depending on how well the MTA received him, he might even be able to spare some time to explore the many sights of the Centerpoint System.

"I might even be able to find a girlfriend there." He shrugged.

A Journeyman was supposed to broaden their vision and experience new sights. While the Centerpoint System was still part of the Komodo Star Sector, it was so different that it pretty much qualified as a de facto first-rate state!

"Meow!"

Lucky floated down on the desk next to his terminal and leisurely flitted his tail.

When Ves attempted to pet his cat, Lucky jerked back with a wary expression.

"Meow! Meow!"

"Fine. I'll prepare your meal."

Ves stood up and walked over to a vault in his stateroom. He grabbed a small box and opened it up before serving it to Lucky.

"Meow!"

The cat immediately dove in, eagerly crunching the expensive exotics between its rock-hard teeth.

Although Lucky could have phased through the vault with his abilities, he insisted that Ves serve him in person!

It was as if Lucky enjoyed treating Ves as his butler!

"You spoiled cat! It's not enough that you're forcing me to spend a fortune for your meals! You haven't even pooped out any gems lately!"

Lucky kept on munching at his meal while completely ignoring Ves. It was as if his role no longer mattered at this stage!

Since he couldn't find any companionship with his pet, Ves opted to talk to Gavin instead.

"Have you noted any remarkable destinations and activities on Centerpoint?" He asked.

"I have. In fact, there's simply too much to do. You could spend decades on Centerpoint and still not run out of stuff to do. While a lot of planets and habitats are closed to anyone who isn't an internal member, there are still way too many settlements that cater to visitors. The treatment and level of access

that you receive depends on your wealth and your rank. Apparently, a lot of venues are closed if you aren't a galactic citizen. Space peasants like me aren't allowed to mingle with your kind."

"Knock it off, Benny." Ves gently slapped his assistant. "Even if I'm about to become a galactic citizen, I'm still a space peasant at heart."

"I've read up a bit on what it means to be a galactic citizen. It means you are essentially equal to an average citizen of a first-rate superstate. The Big Two and all the other huge organizations actually take your rights seriously. As for those like me, we're considered completely expendable!"

The implication was that space peasants didn't matter. They were numbers in a database. What individuality and inherent value they possessed was so trivial that the major powers in human space found it much more convenient to group them up under the simple if derogatory label of space peasant!

The worst part about it was that Ves couldn't entirely dispute this approach. The Big Two and the first-rate superstates were right. The vast majority of humans living outside of their jurisdiction really didn't matter in the grander scheme of things.

To the MTA, the only exceptions to the rule were mech pilots, mech designers and academics pushing the forefront of science. These people received a chance to shed their space peasant beginnings and enter the ranks of true humanity!

"Do you think it's impossible for you to become a galactic citizen?" Ves asked.

"How could I?" Gavin looked morose. "I'm not a mech designer or mech pilot. I don't have any ties to the spaceborn. There's nothing about me that merits the attention of the the Big Two and the first-rate superstates."

"If you really care about it so much, I could probably elevate you to this height one day. Perhaps I'll grow powerful enough to turn everyone I know into a galactic citizen!"

Gavin looked at him oddly. "You'd have to be a Master or a Star Designer to wield that much clout."

"Heh. Sounds doable." Ves grinned while casually stretching his arms.

"Seriously though, don't obsess too much about what it means to be a galactic citizen. It's mostly a way to make those elites feel smug in front of the rest of humanity."

While it sounded like galactic citizens received a lot more rights and privileges in human space, that didn't mean that space peasants were deprived.

You couldn't miss what you didn't know you lost out on. Most space peasants ignorantly lived their lives as if there was nothing wrong. Galactic citizenship was so far out of their reach that they didn't bother pining over what they could never have.

"It's largely superfluous anyway." Ves pointed out. "The only reason I'm eligible to become one is because I've become remarkable. Even without this label, I would still be someone worthy of notice."

"Yeah, but there are plenty of citizens in the first-rate superstates who don't deserve all the benefits they get to enjoy for being born in the right state."

Ves sighed. "Benny, it's pointless to envy the Terrans and the Rubarthans. Sure, it's nice to be born in the most prosperous places in human space, but will anything change just because of your complaints? Instead of moping about the unfairness of it all, just accept it exists and work hard to close the gap. You're right that a lot of galactic citizens don't deserve the benefits they've been given. That just means that space peasants like you have a chance to catch up and exceed them in the future."

That put Gavin in a thoughtful mood. Ves was happy that he managed to pull his assistant away from his nihilism.

"Okay, I get it, boss. I really hate being called a space peasant, but complaining about it won't get me anyway."

A small fiery passion lit up in Gavin's mind. While he might not be able to earn galactic citizenship himself, he could still do his utmost to assist Ves in his career!

Only then would space peasants like Gavin be able to climb above their station!

### **Chapter 1255 Centerpoint**

During the two months of travel, Ves spent most of his time puzzling over the Skull Architect's designs.

Wary of traps, Ves approached them with caution, causing him to take a bit longer than he liked to achieve significant progress.

With his Spirituality still in recovery, Ves keenly felt the difference between his current state and his optimal state.

His passion, energy and drive suffered a lot, forcing him to push through his work even if he would rather do something else.

"A mech designer must be dedicated to his craft." Ves whispered to himself. "How can I call myself a lover of mechs when I can't sustain my interest through tougher times?"

He considered his difficulties to be a test of his perseverance. It was easy to get caught up in designing mechs when he enjoyed the experience. Yet Ves couldn't always keep delaying until he entered in the right mood.

Instead of treating his debilitated state as a disadvantage, he instead saw it as an opportunity to train himself. Only by pushing through adversity would he be able to make the most gains!

Therefore, despite his low energy, Ves managed to summon up enough motivation to keep working on the designs.

He didn't linger too long on the Caskar Pike. After studying it over and over again, Ves concluded that the spaceborn missileer mech didn't possess any hidden traits.

The Skull Architect tasked him with designing a variant, so that was what he did. Aside from tweaking the design and its programming to make it easier to pilot, Ves also imparted it with a pale image to add some life to his variant.

While Ves didn't infuse his image with his precious spiritual energy, he figured that the X-Factor of his design would not be any less than that of the Blackbeak.

"That should be sufficient to give the mech pilots of my variant a modest push. I don't have to pull out all the stops."

It was rather refreshing to Ves to design a variant. While he became accustomed to designing original mechs, he felt like he had gone back in time to the start of his career.

"It's like I'm getting back to basics."

When he designed an original mech, he entered a completely different mindset. He controlled every aspect of a mech design, but bore all the responsibility of its success and failure.

With variants, Ves merely had to look for opportunities to improve or change the configuration of the base model to fall more in line with his own vision.



Aside from finishing up his variant for the Caskar Pike, Ves also started to tinker with the Toroz Ruby, a spaceborn striker mech, and the Jinven, an aerial marksman mech.

The latter two mechs possessed a bit more depth, but not too much. Through careful and meticulous study, Ves found areas in which he could make worthwhile tradeoffs that vastly improved the overall piloting experience of his variants.

While he couldn't maintain the same level of performance, the various tricks he employed significantly lowered the burden on the mech pilots of his variants.

"Mech pilots should always prefer my variants over the base models unless they're elites."

Elite mech pilots such as Taon Melin from the Ylvaine Protectorate or Lord Javier from the Vesia Kingdom were already rare in civilized space.

In a barren, undeveloped region like the frontier, it was simply too difficult to train true elites that could pilot the Skull Architect's mechs to their full potential.

Therefore, Ves immediately knew without a doubt that if the Skull Architect started to produce his variants, his sales would instantly double or triple.

"I really hope he doesn't. I don't want my mechs to be used by thousands of pirates."

The Skull Architect was a very principled mech designer. He refused to compromise the performance of his original designs even if the market demanded change.

Such a mech designer would definitely struggle with the decision to publish his variants.

"Well, it's not like I can influence his decision." Ves shrugged. "I'll just see what he does with my work. Perhaps he only needs my variants for research purposes."

He chugged along inside his stateroom for the rest of the journey to Centerpoint. He took no notice of the destinations he passed along the way. Even when the Barracuda entered the territory of the Friday Coalition, Ves did not express any interest in visiting them despite their various attractions.

Despite his dread towards his upcoming visit to the sector headquarters, Ves saw no point in trying to delay his journey. He already developed numerous contingency plans where he prepared a number of strategies to deflect suspicion.

While the MTA posed a threat to him, they weren't enemies. The concerns of the Association went far beyond figuring out the eccentricities of a single oddball mech designer.

They possessed much greater priorities, such as ensuring their dominance over human space, suppressing the Five Scrolls Compact, keeping recalcitrant states subservient, maintaining parity with the CFA, guarding against alien threats and most importantly propping up the galactic mech industry.

"Lately, the Big Two seem to be preoccupied with other matters."

Ves observed various situations where the CFA and the MTA should have intervened, but chose not to. That was very unusual as the Big Two loved to throw around their weight.

While the CFA eventually mobilized to the frontier in order to fend off the wave of sandmen aggression, the MTA hardly moved out at all in the last couple of decades. The more he witnessed their inaction, the more he suspected that they were gathering their strength.

"What are they guarding against?"

Well, whatever they feared, it shouldn't be any of his concern. He merely went back to his work while the Barracuda and the Greenfeather continued to close the distance to the Centerpoint System.

Both ships encountered a fair amount of resistance during FTL travel. The gravitic tides hadn't been favorable, causing them to progress several weeks slower than their most optimistic projections.

Even so, after almost two months of constant travel and FTL transitions, the pair of ships finally transitioned out of FTL at the edge of the Centerpoint System.

"What a magnificent sight!" Ves gasped as he stood next to Captain Silvestra.

Through the augmented visual projection of the local star system, Ves beheld over a dozen populated planets as well as five stars of varying sizes and luminosity!

"Centerpoint is one of the few quintuple star systems of the Komodo Star Sector." Captain Silvestra explained. "We should have been blasted by radiation by now if the MTA hadn't come in and built Dyson spheres around them to siphon away much of their energy."

When the Komodo Star Sector first opened up for sanctioned colonization, the MTA immediately claimed the Centerpoint System as their own due to its powerful suns and mineral-rich planets.

While the five suns orbiting in a weird fashion around each other made the star system practically unlivable at first, the MTA did not let that stop them. They embarked on a huge construction project and enveloped all of the stars in immense artificial megastructures. Stars were the most convenient sources of heat and energy, so how could the MTA let them all go to waste?

The Dyson spheres they built around the suns only partially captured all of the energy they generated. They left open enough gaps to release a healthy amount of light and heat to sustain life on the nearby planets.

The MTA expended quite a bit of effort to shift the orbits of all of the terrestrial planets and gas giants in the system so that they all fell within the goldilocks zone. Ves even encountered a rumor on the galactic net that the MTA imported additional planets to the Centerpoint System to provide more space for themselves!

"The entire Centerpoint System is an enduring marvel of human ingenuity!" Ves softly admired.

Aside from the partially-sphered suns and the densely-populated planet, the sheer amount of traffic in-system also boggled his mind. Millions of ships of varying sizes, roles and ownership flew back and forth.

Humongous trade convoys that began their journey from distant star sectors arrived at Centerpoint after months or years of constant travel. Robust passenger liners offering passage to the galactic heartland picked up their latest batch of hopeful immigrants looking for a better life.

Most of those immigrants would doubtlessly fail, but exceptions always existed.

These ships only formed a small part of the total ship traffic in the system. Some consisted of in-system transit between different planets and space stations.

A significant amount of these vessels traveled a lot faster than Barracuda as they incorporated advanced propulsion technologies that put the modern corvette to shame!

Only a modest amount of ships traveled this fast. The majority of traffic within the system consisted of vessels that conveyed trade goods and passengers to and from the rest of the star sector.

Captain Silvestra shared some of her thoughts while the Barracuda communicated with traffic control.

"The amount of trade and transit passing through Centerpoint can definitely put Bentheim to shame. The two aren't in the same league. It's central location and its abundant facilities and production centers makes it the premier trading hub of the star sector. Anyone looking to export goods to other star sectors will always start from Centerpoint."

Ves had already read up on these facts, but witnessing the sheer scale of industry and trade up close made him feel very small!

Despite the humongous amount of ships entering and exiting the system, traffic control efficiently handled their entry in the star system. As a highly-populated star system that saw an immense amount of traffic, the Barracuda and the Greenfeather were not allowed to fly independently.

Each time they wanted to fly to a different planet or space station, they needed to submit their flight plans ahead of time. Traffic control would then issue them a specific route that they needed to follow very strictly.

If not for this precaution, ships would definitely crash into each other despite the immensity of space! This problem was especially acute when the ships neared their destination as thousands of them converged in close proximity at the end!

It only took a few minutes for traffic control to approve their flight plans and issue their routes.

"Setting course for Halcyon Citadel." The helmswoman said as she keyed in the new route. "We'll arrive at our destination within a week!"

The Barracuda and the Greenfeather transitioned out of FTL very far away from the center of the star system. Not only did the five suns force ships to emerge further away, but the MTA also installed twenty-four immense gravitic anchors in an extended sphere around the Centerpoint System to force them to exit FTL even further away!

While this introduced a lot of inconveniences to people looking to travel to the inner system, it enhanced the security of this strategically-important star system.

"We're being subjected to over a thousand long-ranged scans." The captain reported as the sensor console lit up with a deluge of alerts. "The MTA and many other parties in the system are constantly keeping tabs on who goes in and out."

"Will they be able to scan the insides of our ships, captain?"

"Definitely. At the very least, you can assume that we can't hide any goods from the MTA's scanners. As for the spotters in the star system, their scanners are probably much less capable. The Barracuda is quite well-shielded against most probing scans, but I can't say the same for the Greenfeather."

Ves nodded. "That's fine. It's not like we are carrying any contraband."

The assets that he truly wanted to hide were safely stowed away in his Inventory. Perhaps the only point of concern to Ves was Lucky. The mechanical cat was too damn remarkable for his own good.

Fortunately, Lucky also assimilated CFA-grade ECM technology. That should be enough to fend off any powerful sweeps. If that wasn't enough, he could still employ his Miniaturized Stealth Generator to escape targeted scans.

"Inform me when our ships are being subjected to penetrating scans." He ordered. "Even if we can't do anything about them, I would still like to know if we are being watched."

#### Chapter 1256 Halcyon Citadel

It took a week for the Barracuda and the Greenfeather to approach Halcyon Citadel.

During this time, the two ships were constantly bombarded with scans. Only a small proportion originated from the patrol mechs and vessels of the MTA.

The majority of scans came from observer ships placed throughout the star system. Captain Silvestra guessed that most of those vessels worked for different factions of the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony.

"The two second-rate states are constantly locked in a struggle over the star sector. Centerpoint plays a special role in their rivalry because it is the most important nexus of trade in the region. Even if they have no hopes of taking it over, they can't ignore what's going on here."

"The MTA allows them to take snapshots of all of the traffic going through this system?" Ves frowned.

Nobody enjoyed being stared at so blatantly every second of the day! The Barracuda already logged millions of active scans, and that was only what her sensors managed to detect!

"Humans are curious creatures." She replied. "The MTA is often forced to pick and choose their battles. It's especially difficult to fight against human instinct. I think they don't mind these scans because the observers know better than to pry into their own ships and assets."

Any ship that attempted to actively scan an MTA ship or vessel would quickly be blown into bits regardless of the reason! No one was crazy enough to put the Association's patience to the test in their core territory!

Even though they might have been slacking off elsewhere, Centerpoint remained firmly under their control!

As the Barracuda and the Greenfeather neared Halcyon Citadel, the latter ship diverted to another route.

The MTA didn't allow any mechs other than their own to approach the headquarters. Ves wasn't even allowed to bring a bodyguard or pet!

"You'll have to remain behind as well, Lucky." Ves told his cat as the critter blissfully munched one of the last batches of exotics that he bought at Bentheim. "Make sure to keep your ECM up and shielded around your body. I don't know what kind of tech is stuffed inside your body, but it will definitely attract the attention of the MTA if they catch a glimpse!"

"Meow."

After issuing his warning to Lucky, Ves took a deep breath and prepared himself for his upcoming visit.

The Barracuda soon came within orbit of Halcyon Citadel.

To call it a space station would put every other space station to shame. It was actually as large as a moon!

As the MTA's premier center of power in the star sector, Halcyon Citadel brilliantly encapsulated their might. If their Dyson spheres hadn't impressed their guests, then this immense space fortification never failed to turn everyone speechless!

First-time visitors such as Ves and the crew of the Barracuda sat in stunned silence as they observed the immense mass of Halcyon Citadel. It was a moon-sized hive of industry, administration and defense!

Halcyon Citadel was the MTA's seat of power! The supreme sector associate directed the MTA's branch in this star sector from this very space fortification!



The Sector Mech Council that consisted of a mix of high-ranking officials, mech pilots and mech designers occasionally convened to decide on matters that impacted the region!

A chill ran through Ves as the Barracuda came closer and closer until she parked at her designated orbit.

"Halcyon Citadel has already dispatched a shuttle to pick you up." The captain notified him. "We can go no further from here. Only ships, mechs and shuttles from the MTA are allowed to approach the surface."

Ves nodded. "Understood."

As the sector headquarters of the MTA, security was very stringent here. Not only did the citadel itself possess immense defenses, it also boasted a huge amount of mechs and orbital fortifications that could fend off the entire Mech Corps of the Bright Republic without breaking a sweat!

Viewing all of the wonders of Centerpoint System really hit home how little the Bright Republic and the other third-rate states of the star sector mattered.

As the MTA shuttle approached the Barracuda's starboard side, Ves waited in front of the hatch alongside Gavin.

"This is it, Ves." Gavin said. "This must be an exciting moment for you, right? The MTA is rolling out the red carpet for you! It must be a dream come true!"

Ves awkwardly smiled. It was more of a nightmare than a dream to him! "Let's not get too excited, Gavin. A lot of Journeymen across the star sector get invited to Halcyon Citadel every year. I'm nothing special."

Journeymen may enjoy an honored status in the Bright Republic, but the MTA hardly noticed their existence at all!

The two of them chatted a bit as they waited for the CFA shuttle to form an airtight seal with the Barracuda's starboard hatch. Once the two vessels

formed a solid connection, Ves entered through the hatches and entered into the shuttle's stylish passenger compartment.

Aside from a few empty seats, a single android greeted him upon arrival.

[Mr. Ves Larkinson, the Mech Trade Association welcomes you to Centerpoint System.] An elegant-looking feminine android greeted him with a slightly-robotic voice. [I am Delta-Gina, your personally designated service android. My role is to guide you through the halls of Halcyon Citadel. I am also capable of answering your questions.]

It figured that the MTA would assign a bot instead of a human as his chaperone. Ves eyed the bot with mild interest as he seated himself. Delta-Gina's design immediately sparked his interest.

The android had been designed by a very capable mech designer! One who understood the human form extremely well!

There was so much he could observe from the android's design that Ves spent several minutes just staring at the remarkable creation!

As the shuttle began to detach from the Barracuda and descend to Halcyon Citadel, Ves finally collected himself a bit. "Who will I meet once I enter Halcyon Citadel?"

[I am not allowed to answer this question.]

"How many Journeymen are invited to Halcyon Citadel per day?"

[I am not allowed to answer this question.]

"Who designed your model?"

[I am not allowed to answer this question.]

"Can you even answer any question at all?!"

[I am Delta-Gina, your personally designated service android. My role is to guide you through the halls of Halcyon Citadel. I am also capable of answering your questions.]

Ves shook his head and gave up on the stupid android. While the CFA dedicated a lot of research into developing more advanced AIs and automated systems, the MTA was much more reluctant to follow suit.

Many mech pilots and mech designers feared that automation would replace their roles entirely one day. As the main patron of these professions, the MTA would never do anything to threaten their core interests!

Still, Ves couldn't help but feel disappointed that a stupid bot like Delta-Gina was the best that the MTA could spare for their guests.

While the shuttle swiftly descended to the artificial moon and entered one of its gaping crevasses, Ves paid no further mind to the android.

Instead, he prepared one of his precautions.

During the trip to Centerpoint, Ves came up with a plan to deflect the MTA's attention. The first step of doing so was to construct an altered image of himself as a foolproof mask.

He developed several masks, in fact.

These masks helped him adjust his personality, his thinking pattern, his body language and his other tells into a desired direction. His earlier experiences with masks had taught him what to expect.

Perhaps the most important lesson that he needed to keep in mind was that his masks weren't foolproof! Even if his facade was incredibly convincing, it didn't stop others from gathering other clues!

Calabast already taught him this lesson when she figured out that Ves was responsible for stealing the holy relic on Kesseling VIII!

Therefore, Ves put a lot of thought on how to portray himself to the MTA. Obviously, he couldn't adopt a completely different personality. There were lots of rumors that the MTA had eyes and ears everywhere, so they would have been able to determine his actual personality.

If he tried to act too differently from how he used to convey himself, then he would quickly attract their attention, which was exactly what he didn't want to see!

Therefore, most of the masks he constructed during the trip didn't diverge too much from his actual personality. Ves merely opted to exaggerate some of his traits and put a different spin on some of his attitudes.

His goal today was to fool the MTA without letting them realize that they were being fooled.

Easy, right?

Well, Ves was about to find out, as the shuttle had just slipped into a massive hangar bay devoted solely to transit shuttles like the one he rode. Once the shuttle parked at its designated landing zone, Ves and the android stepped out, only to step upon a lifter platform that rapidly conveyed the two deeper inside the citadel!

Ves took a moment to marvel at the immense construction around him. He noted that Halcyon Citadel was built for war. Its metallic blue interior walls consisted of some kind of super-advanced alloy that could probably withstand a crashing starship without suffering a single dent.

As the floater platform accelerated to an unreal speed, neither Ves nor the android worried about being thrown off, as neither of them were subjected to drag.

His floater platform entered into a series of tunnels and joined the line of many transportation vehicles. Ves could see thousands of people and goods being

ferried all over the massive citadel. While he didn't know what exactly went on inside the headquarters, it functioned more than just an administrative center.

Even as the floater platform accelerated to a ludicrous speed, it still took around half an hour for it to reach its destination. It passed through a number of security checkpoints before entering into a nicer section of the citadel.

Once the floater platform touched down at a very expansive landing zone, the android introduced him to the area.

[Welcome to the Design Center of Halcyon Citadel. Many mech designers in the direct employ of the Mech Trade Association work here. Please do not disturb our internal members you see along the way.]

Ves could see that he wasn't the only new Journeyman present. Several other floater platforms landed, depositing fresh Journeymen along with their accompanying androids.

Each of them headed into the Design Center but split off to different areas. Ves passed through several remarkable displays and projections showing off various impressive accomplishments.

They walked through the corridors for a while. Ves believed this was a deliberate part on the MTA because they could have brought him to his destination directly with a smaller floater platform.

Instead, they forced their guests to traverse the remaining distance on foot.

It was a humbling moment to Ves. Everything he saw so far reinforced the might of the MTA while making him feel smaller.

Fortunately, the trip only lasted for twenty minutes or so. Before his patience started to thin, the android guided him through a strict security checkpoint before guiding him to a grand hall.

A single middle-aged man stood in front of a first-class mech on display. Ves could hardly keep his eyes off the impressive-looking multipurpose mech.

Delta-Gina quietly stepped back while Ves arrived in front of the man.

"Mr. Larkinson. It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Professor Kastel Oodiv, a Senior Mech Designer in the service of the MTA. It is my role to verify your advancement and to induct you into the ranks of Journeyman."

The two shook hands, upon which Ves immediately felt something wrong from his design seed.

It encountered a probe!

"As expected." Professor Oodiv smiled. "I would hate to waste my time with a fraud. However, my judgement is not enough to confirm you as a Journeyman. Please come this way. We will need to perform a more thorough examination."

Ves confidently smiled as if he didn't have anything to fear. In fact, his insides were shaking! If not for the mask he wore, he would have looked like a nervous wreck by now!

### **Chapter 1257 Exchanging Secrets**

Fortunately for Ves, the examination wasn't as extensive as he thought. Professor Oodiv merely guided him into some sort of medical facility and directed him to enter an all-round examination chamber.

Ves remained standing while tons of scans suffused throughout his entire body. He felt as if a thousand fingers massaged his insides!

The uncomfortable experience ended after a dozen seconds. The highly-advanced scanners didn't require any additional time to record the internal makeup of his entire body.

The professor directed an intrigued glance at him when he came out of the examination chamber. "The results have shown a lot of remarkable abnormalities. Although I've already read about it in your record, it is still very notable to see that your body has been subjected to very extensive augmentations."

Ves brashly smiled. "I went through three rounds of gene optimization treatments, courtesy of the CFA! Although they're not exactly up to date, they are some of the best you can get in the galaxy!"

That caused the professor to falter a bit in his smile. "Ah, yes. I have to admit the CFA does good work. The MTA is better, though. The CFA's gene optimization treatments are primarily geared towards optimizing a human's long-term survival aboard ships. Our organization on the other hand has developed very specialized gene treatments that cater specifically to mech designers!"

"That sounds great, but a mech designer like me can never afford them. I'm very grateful to the CFA for allowing me the opportunity to optimize my genes and improve my lifespan for free!"

He spoke his words with utmost sincerity, at least as much as his mask could convey.

While Professor Oodiv looked simple and unassuming, Ves bet that the Senior was receiving tons of information through an implant or some other means at this very moment. Lie detectors and other monitors were probably monitoring him closely nonstop!

The professor and the android slowly guided Ves out of the medical facility. While they were walking towards their next destination, the professor began to lecture him about the MTA.

"I'm sure you know what the Mech Trade Association stands for. Everything you've learned is true, but that is only what the public is allowed to know. Now that you have taken your first real step into mech design, it is time for you to become inducted into some of our secrets."

"If I may ask, professor, does every new Journeyman get to enjoy the treatment of a Senior of the MTA?"

"Heavens, no! Usually, one of our internal Journeyman will do. The reason why you merit a different treatment is because of how quickly you've advanced. Your nominal Master likewise received an impressive reception when she advanced to her current at her young age. While age does not necessarily correlate to ability, we are very hopeful to talents who advance faster through the ranks."

That made a lot of sense. An internal Senior should be an extremely powerful person. Their time was very valuable! If they were forced to meet every new Journeyman who arrived at Halcyon Citadel, they wouldn't have any time left to design their mechs or continue their research!

Ves had already anticipated something like this. His mental preparation along with his mask allowed him to maintain his composure even if he walked right alongside a Senior who was vastly more capable than the Seniors of the rest of the star sector!

"What is your specialty?"

"I specialize in pressure tolerance. To elaborate, I primarily design aerial mechs that are capable of operating in the upper layers of gas giants."

"Wow!"

That caused Ves to look very impressed. He couldn't even imagine designing such a mech! At the very least, no third-class mech would be capable of surviving the extreme circumstances of gas giants!



The professor eventually led Ves to an office. As the two of them took their seats, Ves figured that the interrogation began in earnest. He tried his best to project confidence and assurance in his own strength.

The professor activated his desk terminal and began to peruse some files. "Before we move on to the induction ritual, I'd like for you to answer some questions to fill out the gaps in our record of you. Is that alright with you, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Feel free to ask."

Ves was sure that the MTA would get its answers regardless of what he said. Saying no was just stupid.

"Alright, let us start with the greatest point of ambiguity. In your application to be recognized as a Journeyman, you described your design philosophy as 'metaphysical man-machine symbiosis'. While I know the meaning of the individual words, what exactly do they mean in combination?"

Ves looked a little hesitant. "I don't really like to elaborate my design philosophy."

"Do not be concerned, Mr. Larkinson. We are very well aware that design philosophies are deeply personal to mech designers like you. They form part of your trade secrets and are an essential component to your competitive advantage."

"Then why ask?"

"Because the MTA endeavors to elevate mechs further. Think about it. If every mech designer hoards all of their secrets, how can the standard of mechs improve as a whole? It can't! The MTA exists to manage the many innovations that mech designers develop in their pursuit to realize their design philosophies."

Ves wanted to scratch his head at this explanation. "Why would a mech designer allow the MTA to spread their trade secrets to others?"

"There are many reasons to do so, some of which you'll learn if you advance to Master." Professor Oodiv grinned. "However, the main reason to do so is because turning in your exclusive innovations and allowing other mech designers to make use of them is one of the most effective ways to earn our exclusive MTA merits. Our merits can be exchanged for several exclusive goods, the most significant of which is high-grade life-prolonging treatment!"

Ves widened his eyes. So this was where mech designers could go if they wanted to prolong their lives beyond two-hundred years or three-hundred years of life!

A mech designer's design philosophy and the innovations derived from them were incredibly valuable! No mech designer would voluntarily give away their exclusive tricks, techniques and knowledge! How could they maintain their competitive advantage if thousands of other mech designers could design something similar to their work?

Yet as much as mech designers valued the sanctity of their design philosophies, they valued their lives even more!

What was the use of hoarding all of their knowledge if they couldn't leverage them into improving their lives?

Everyone knew that the Big Two and the first-rate superstates held an oligopoly on high-grade life-prolonging treatments. While it was easy enough for someone wealthy to extend their lives by a hundred years, any step further than that could only be exchanged from one of those four powerful entities!

"Secrets are valuable, Mr. Larkinson." The professor continued. "The MTA recognizes that fact. Therefore, we have a very sophisticated remuneration scheme in place. The greater your contribution, the more merits you receive."

You are doing every mech designer in the galaxy a huge favor if you illuminate a better way to design a mech. Many of the older generation see it as a way to leave a legacy behind."

"I see."

The MTA essentially established a market for trade secrets. As long as the price was right, mech designers were more than willing to give away their secrets for an opportunity to extend their lives!

"As a newly-advanced Journeyman, we won't ask you to reveal your methods or anything too sensitive. For now, we merely want you to describe your design philosophy in more detail so that we can develop a more precise understanding of your specialty. We will maintain utmost confidentiality of everything you reveal in this office."

The professor didn't phrase his words as a request, which was a very clever wordplay on his part. It sounded as if it was already a given that Ves would comply!

Ves smiled at the professor. "Okay. I trust the MTA. I haven't revealed the premise of my design philosophy to anyone, not even my subordinate mech designer. It's very controversial."

"The MTA has encountered many different design philosophies, some of which are really unusual. Regardless of how eccentric your design philosophy sounds, we will never judge you for that. Plenty of mech designers with unusual design philosophies have gone on to advance to Master and made the impossible into the possible!"

"Alright.. here goes then." Ves sighed and took a deep breath. "As you already know, I describe my specialization as metaphysical man-machine symbiosis. The central premise of my design philosophy is that I believe there is more to

mechs than mechs. They are different from bots in that they are intricately tied to their human mech pilots!"

"That is true. Is that where the symbiosis comes from?"

"Yes!" Ves adopted an impassioned expression. "Humans are powerful! When they combine their strengths with mechs, they contribute much more than their thoughts and their decision-making! What happens on a technical level is not the extent of what happens when a mech pilot interfaces with a mech! Instead, they empower each other!"

The professor frowned a little. "In what way?"

"Ah, that's where the metaphysical part of my design philosophy comes in! While most mech designers focus on the technical performance of their mechs, I believe that there is much more to improve! It is an attribute that is intricately tied to the mech pilots of the mechs!"

"And that is?"

"Divinity!"

"...Divinity?" The professor questioned.

"Yes! Divinity! Godhood!" Ves raved. "It wasn't until I visited the Ylvaine Protectorate and experienced their wonderful faith that I finally realized the truth! The metaphysical component of my design philosophy stands for divinity!"

The professor remained silent while Ves elaborated on his point.

"When I founded my company, I decided to call it the Living mech Corporation. This name expresses my belief that mechs can be more than lifeless objects! They're different from a hammer or a pistol! Although they are built rather than grown, I believe the man-machine connection facilitates a

symbiotic relationship between the mech and the mech pilot that allow the both of them to acquire each other's traits!"

"That is.. a remarkable assumption." The professor frowned. "While it is proven that the minds of mech pilots gradually adjusts the longer they interface with a mech, I have never heard of mechs adjusting in response to being piloted."

"That is because it can't be measured! It all happens on a metaphysical level! Don't you see, professor? Mechs are capable of coming alive because they receive the worship of their mech pilots! This is the secret to Ylvainan transcendence! Although ordinary worship isn't very effective because of all the barriers in the way, the man-machine connection skips most of that! By connecting the mind of a mech pilot directly with the systems of a mech, they share an extremely close connection! My design philosophy believes that as long as mechs are designed in a certain fashion, they can capture the worship of the mech pilots and come alive under their control as gods!"

"This.."

"Just think of the potential!" Ves exuberantly yelled. "As long as I succeed, mech design will undergo a pivotal transformation! No longer will I be regarded as someone who designs mechs! Instead, I'll become known as a designer of gods! My creations may look like machines, but hidden inside is beating the metaphysical hearts of gods! This is my ultimate aspiration! This is the future of mech design! Countless people will worship my new gods! In exchange, my gods will fight on behalf of their worshippers! No ordinary mech will be able to withstand the might of my gods! Not even god pilots will be able to withstand the flood of mass-produced gods!"

The professor didn't bother to hide his astonishment.

This was exactly what Ves wanted to see! Even if he was releasing a torrent of nonsense from his mouth, he sincerely believed in this vision due to donning a mask!

Ves deliberately chose to describe his design philosophy in this manner because he wanted to exploit the MTA's biases.

While the Association may claim to be open-minded, as a very science and research-focused organization, they did not take well to religion and superstition!

One of the most surefire ways to drive a mech designer crazy was to invoke unverifiable beliefs!

#### **Chapter 1258 Special Mech Designer**

The Big Two possessed a mixed relationship with religion. A huge chunk of humanity earnestly believed in something greater.

The Mech Trade Association frequently grappled with religion due to their recruitment policies. If they wanted to recruit promising mech pilots, mech designers and other capable people, they couldn't afford to snub the religious side of humanity.

As the self-proclaimed protectors of humanity, they derived their legitimacy from how their internal members partially reflected the people they protected. If they completely eschewed believers in their ranks, religious states across human space would rebel at being ruled by overbearing secularists!

While the Common Fleet Alliance suffered less from this problem, they too had to take religion into account as many powerful spaceborn clans believed in space gods and the like!

However, even though the Big Two accommodated the beliefs of their internal personnel to an extent, their default stance was that they shouldn't be expressed when on duty.

Countless different faiths existed. Many of them imposed idiosyncratic rules on their adherents.

Some proscribed that men should not be in the same room with women. Others forced their believers to spit on the face of men with facial hair. One religion even stated that those with lighter skin tones unquestionably needed to obey the commands of those with darker skin tones!

The big problem with religion in modern humanity was that many of them started off as insincere attempts to control people. These cults advanced the personal and political interests of their founders.

Because human space was big enough to offer room to countless cults and religions, many of them still existed even though they really shouldn't! Some even evolved from a personal cult solely into a huge movement that became rock solid.

The Big Two couldn't do anything about them. The only stance they could realistically adopt was to impose neutrality among their own ranks.

Beliefs needed to be respected, but beliefs should not supercede the rules and regulations of the organization.

This essentially meant that while the MTA lightly accommodated the beliefs of their internal members, it really didn't want to deal with the headache of juggling with billions if not trillions of beliefs at once!

Therefore, an internal bias against religion still ran rife within the organization. Secularists ran much of the Association, and those who were openly devout received much less opportunities.

While many religious members objected to this discrimination, they tolerated each other even less. Many beliefs clashed against each other, which meant that they could never form a united power bloc to stand up for their collective interests.

While secularists formed their own rivaling power blocs, they all joined hands against the constant encroachment of religion in the workplace.

When Ves met with Professor Kastel Oodiv, he could immediately tell that the Senior was a secularist. The professor enjoyed an esteemed position within Halcyon Citadel, which meant that at the very least he played by the MTA rules.

Even if Professor Oodiv was a believer, Ves could still work with that as faiths often clashed!

Time went on as Ves became increasingly more unhinged as he continued to ramble about his design philosophy.

"...The power of belief transcends the power of technology! With all the strange metaphysical phenomena that is taking place in the galaxy, I'm convinced that there is a greater power out there that humanity has sorely neglected! As mech designers, we have the unique opportunity to harness this strange power and to bend them to our will in order to create a new form of life, something that is greater than a man or machine!..."

In order to annoy the MTA even more, Ves even injected some generous praise towards the CFA! There was nothing worse to the MTA than witnessing mech designers praise the CFA!

"...I'm sure the MTA knows what has transpired on Aeon Corona VII. The existence of Sacred Gods firmly proves that my assumptions have merit! The CFA researchers who were stranded on the heavy gravity planet are geniuses for coming up with these species! They went a step ahead of me and turned wild exobeasts into god-like entities! The CFA is such an innovative organization that I couldn't help but study their work and take some notes! By following their example, I can pick up where they left off and turn their dreams into reality someday!..."



Naturally, Ves also made sure not to present himself as a threat to mankind.

"...Mark my words, professor. A day will come when mechs come alive and demand the same rights as humans in my society! It scares me a bit when I think that living mechs wielding the power of gods might subvert humanity one day, but I don't believe that will come true! Whenever mechs become more powerful than the mech pilot, the latter will be able to grow through the man-machine connection, thereby equalizing their power balance! As one side grows, the other one grows as well! That is the meaning behind symbiosis!..."

Design philosophies were deeply personal to mech designers. They encapsulated the core of their beliefs, attitudes, assumptions and perspectives on how mechs should be designed!

As Ves spewed his mouth with all the nonsense that he prepared beforehand, he always expressed his full sincerity!

No matter how well the monitoring systems in Professor Oodiv's office were able to read his subconscious ticks and body language, Ves did not appear to be telling any lies!

The professor looked increasingly more dazed as Ves rambled on and on about his supposed design philosophy.

So far, Ves hardly invoked any scientific principles or assumptions grounded by reality. It all leaned heavily towards fantasy and wishful thinking, exactly matching the stereotype associated with Class IX design philosophies!

In fact, the stigma against Class IX design philosophies was so pervasive that some secularists outright referred to the entire lot as superstition!

The Senior finally held up his hand. "Enough, Mr. Larkinson! I've heard more than enough to annotate your record in our database. We firmly understand what you mean now with metaphysical man-machine symbiosis!"

"Ah, my apologies, professor. I got caught up for a little bit." Ves reined himself in and offered the professor a modest smile. "It's liberating to express my design philosophy without reserve to an open-minded organization like the MTA."

"Ah, yes. Your design philosophy is certainly bold and forward-thinking. I wish you all the luck in trying to realize your vision!"

Ves could practically feel the skepticism oozing out of the professor. The Senior probably made up his mind about the odd and eccentric Journeyman.

The impression that Ves left today would definitely help mark his record with descriptors such as 'superstitious', 'irrational' and 'CFA sympathiser'.

Perhaps if Ves was lucky, the professor would even include the phrase 'religious nut' in his record, which was the most ideal outcome!

Each additional descriptor worsened the MTA's regards towards Ves! Even though he would doubtlessly receive much less care and attention from the Association, Ves didn't need their help anyway!

After Ves extensively described his supposed design philosophy, the professor quickly moved on. After asking a few other questions, the man quickly wrapped up the meeting.

"Congratulations, Mr. Larkinson. We're very satisfied with how forthcoming you've been with us. We've heard enough to fill out the missing gaps in your record. You are now cleared to be inducted as a Journeyman Mech Designer and a galactic citizen. Please follow your assigned android as it will guide you to the Master Hall to conduct the ceremony."

While Ves was all smiles as he followed Delta-Gina out of the design center, he strongly suspected that this wasn't part of his original treatment. Due to the awful impression that he left behind, the professor couldn't wait to shoo Ves away from his office!

From what Ves had guessed, the induction ritual should have been a solemn occasion where newly-advanced Journeymen developed the beginnings of an intimate bond with the MTA.

For the professor to skip his involvement in this ceremony and let a worthless android take it over was the strongest sign that Ves had succeeded in his plan!

This was why he freely smiled as he obediently followed after Delta-Gina as they stepped on a floater platform and traveled deeper into the bowels of Halcyon Citadel.

The space fortification's monitoring systems may believe that Ves was happy because he was about to be confirmed as a Journeyman and a galactic citizen. In truth, he felt relieved that the MTA regarded him with the same fondness as a spoiled nutrient pack!

"The smellier, the better." He muttered, probably making himself appear more unhinged in Delta-Gina's company.

Ves quite enjoyed this experience, actually. Even though he did not express his true thoughts, this was the first time he described the essence of his design philosophy to someone else.

Regardless if he distorted his explanation by dialing up the crazy, Ves truly felt sublime by releasing some of his repressed thoughts.

This must be what the new living prophet meant. He did indeed feel cleansed by coming clean!

Of course, part of this was because he still wore the mask of a superstitious mech designer. Ves did not plan to shed his mask until he left Halcyon Citadel!

Only until he left the inner sanctum of the MTA would Ves feel relieved to drop his act. Until then, Ves needed to make sure to exhibit as little loopholes as possible!

After around twenty minutes of travel, the floater platform departed from the stream of traffic and descended next to a highly-secured section that was close to the core of Halcyon Citadel.

They waited a short moment in front of the huge double doors before a pair of mech designers and an android exited the hall.

The internal Journeyman guiding the newly-ascended mech designer looked oddly at Ves and his sole company before turning away dismissively.

[Please enter the Master Hall, Mr. Larkinson.] Delta-Gina beckoned. [The induction ritual will begin when you reach the end of the hall.]

Ves stepped inside, followed demurredly by his android. He dropped his smile as soon as the double doors closed.

The Master Hall exhibited a number of mechs. Each stood to either side of Ves as he slowly walked forward. Ves instantly recognized that all of the mechs had been designed by Masters.

While they encompassed a wide variety of mech types and production dates, the mechs each exhibited a strong sense of power. All of them were first-class mechs that showcased the pinnacle of what mech design could offer at their respective mech generations.

The oldest mechs were placed at the front of the hall. As Ves walked further and further, he encountered newer mechs. Each new pair of mechs to his left and right seemed to showcase the advancements that mech designers achieved over their predecessors.

Ves felt touched by this experience. These mechs had been placed here to inspire the Journeymen who were about to undergo the induction ritual.

Perhaps one day their own mechs would grace the Master Halls of the MTA!

As Ves stepped to the other end of the hall, he was flanked by modern mechs that could definitely put Axelar's Ouroboros to shame.

At the end of the hall was a well-like pit that plunged through the floor and led to a seemingly bottomless abyss.

Floating in the middle was a contained ball of antimatter.

This was a highly potent amount of mass and energy! If handled improperly, the entire Master Hall would probably blow up, with him inside!

The android that accompanied him took no notice of this highly-energetic mass that hovered a stone's throw away from the pair.

[Mr. Larkinson, the induction ritual will now begin. In order to be inducted as a Journeyman Mech Designer and a galactic citizen, you must repeat the Mech Designer's Oath. Only by abiding by the principles of the Mech Trade Association will you be able to practice your profession responsibly and earn the trust of your clients.]

"Understood." Ves nodded.

He was familiar with the MTA's principles and he agreed with them. Mostly. Sometimes.

### **Chapter 1259 Mech Designers Oath**

Ves swore the Mech Designer's Oath in front of the bottomless well and uncomfortably close to a contained mass of antimatter.

He was sure there was a lot of symbolism behind this arrangement, but the meaning of it escaped him at the moment.

The android recited the oath for Ves to repeat. To his credit, he swore the oath as sincerely as possible. Overall, the oath was rather plain and condensed many of the MTA's core principles.

"...I swear to put my mech design abilities at the disposal of mech pilots, and never attempt to place myself above them. I will do my best to reward their trust in me by designing sound mechs that mech pilots can entrust their lives to in battle. I will never steal or claim credit for any achievements made by mech pilots who pilot my mechs..."

"...I swear to present my mechs to mech pilots and other clients in a truthful manner. I will not employ deceptive practices that obfuscate or exaggerate the actual performance of my works. I will always explain my mechs in a manner which mech pilots can understand, and avoid confusing them with an excessive amount of technical jargon..."

"...I swear that I will respect the contributions of my fellow mech designers. I will not steal, borrow or make use of their methods unless I properly credit their sources. If my work is a derivative of another mech designer's work, I will accept any arrangements made by the MTA to properly remunerate the original mech designer or developer. In no circumstance will I ever plagiarize the works of others..."

"...I swear to abide by the rights and responsibilities of galactic citizenship. As a responsible galactic citizen, I will respect the rights and responsibilities of other galactic citizens..."

That last part was very peculiar to Ves. While he swore to abide by a bunch of rules whenever he interacted with a galactic citizen, his oath did not obligate him to do anything special towards those who didn't enjoy this status.

What this basically meant was that Ves could kill a bunch of space peasants and the MTA probably wouldn't care!

Ves couldn't help but think back to the Aeon Corona Mission. Back then, Major Verle, Captain Byrd and all the other mech officers explicitly warned them all that they should carefully respect the lives of the descendents of the original crew of the Starlight Megalodon.

Now he knew why the Vandals were so insistent. Without exception, every CFA serviceman was a galactic citizen! Their children were galactic citizens as well!

As space peasants, the Vandals enjoyed a much lower status than the crew of the Starlight Megalodon. While they were allowed to defend themselves against hostile galactic citizens, they were not allowed to encroach on the rights of galactic citizens without a good reason!

Ves knew that he hadn't treated some of the descendents of the original crew very well. Still, he took comfort with the knowledge that the dwarves were so far removed from the original crew of the Starlight Megalodon that the CFA probably didn't regard them as galactic citizens anymore.

How could the elitist CFA ever bring themselves to recognize savage, stinking dwarves as their equals?!

At the end of the swearing ceremony, Delta-Gina symbolically held a projected badge of galactic citizenship which flew into his heart.

[At this moment, you are officially registered as a galactic citizen. As a tier 12 galactic citizen, you enjoy the most basic recognition of every major human organization in the galaxy. Your spouse, children, apprentices, heirs and other people will not be conveyed with galactic citizenship. Please study the full rules at your discretion.]

Ves nodded in understanding. There were twelve tiers of galactic citizenship, and he had been bestowed with the most basic one. He would have to

become one of the higher leaders of the MTA or become a Star Designer in order to become a tier 1 galactic citizen!

That was way too far away!

Delta-Gina gestured towards the floating ball of anti-matter. [Now that you have gone through the induction process, you are now cleared to learn confidential information that the Mech Trade Association has made available to Journeymen.]

The android sounded a bit more solemn, as if she had been programmed to convey the gravity of the information that she was about to reveal.

[The Mech Trade Association desires you to keep everything you are about to learn to yourselves. Do not discuss these matters with anyone except mech designers directly in our service. You will be stripped of galactic citizenship and be subject to strict punishment if you violate our confidentiality demands.]

"I promise to keep what I've learned here confidential." Ves replied seriously.

Delta-Gina wasn't satisfied with a verbal promise, and served him a very strict-looking projected non-disclosure agreement. After skimming through the document, Ves found out that the MTA would make his life absolutely miserable if he spilled their secrets!

Naturally, he still signed the NDA.

Once Delta-Gina found everything in order, she began to reveal the first secret.

[You are cleared to learn two pieces of confidential information, Mr. Larkinson. First, I will briefly describe the origin of extraordinary power of Journeymen, Seniors, Masters and Star Designers.]

This definitely attracted his attention!



Delta-Gina waved a hand, summoning a projection of various remarkable mech designs performing faintly above their apparent technical parameters.

[Throughout the history of mech design, the division between mech designers was not as apparent. Knowledge, experience, application and creativity were the determining factors to judge whether a mech designer is regarded as an Apprentice or a Senior. That has changed when the MTA discovered that certain mech designers are able to imbue their mechs and mech designs with metaphysical properties that enhance the performance of their work without a logical explanation.]

[This has led to a landmark transformation within the MTA. After much study and research, we have studied the phenomenon that is the source of these metaphysical manifestations. We have determined that it is a discipline that is uniquely tied to human mentality. We call it psionics. Each human possesses a small degree of psionic power, but only few are capable of developing it to a degree that is significant enough to effect real change. While mech pilots are the most apparent practitioners of psionic powers, mech designers are just as capable of bending reality.]

Ves looked stunned. While he shouldn't be surprised that the MTA weren't blind enough to discount the existence of spirituality, he was still surprised at how much they knew!

Psionics! That was how the MTA regarded spirituality!

[The study of psionics within the MTA is highly classified. At your current rank, you are only allowed to know a limited amount of our findings.]

[First, psionics is uniquely human. No alien species has ever demonstrated comparable powers.]

As if Ves believed those words. Exobeasts like Qilanxo already disproved that spirituality was the exclusive domain of humans. Whether the MTA truly

believed in their assertion or merely wanted to convey human superiority, Ves couldn't tell.

It was still a sign that Ves should not take the MTA at their word!

[Second, only an extremely small proportion of humanity possesses the potential to express their psionic powers. You have not been cleared to learn the exact proportion and other relevant figures. For now, all you are allowed to know is that the occurrence of psionic potential is very random and infrequent. While children and offspring of high-ranking mech designers and mech pilots enjoy a slightly higher chance of exhibiting psionic potential, it is far from a guarantee.]

This fell in line with what the Larkinson Family learned after nurturing numerous expert pilots in every generation. So many Larkinson mech pilots aspired to advance to experts, only to be doomed from the beginning. No matter how hard they worked, they would never be able to shed their mortality!

[Third, psionic power is not stable and can be gained or lost through various circumstances. It is also highly elusive because it does not exist in a tangible form in the material dimensions. Therefore, the mechanics behind psionic power are not completely defined. As a mech designer, the best way to ensure a stable growth of psionic power is to follow the advice and instructions of the Mech Trade Association. Following our principles minimizes the risk of adverse reactions from your psionic power.]

Naturally, the MTA would say something like that. To their credit, the MTA was probably right. By acting in a proper and responsible fashion, a mech designer's spirituality wouldn't undergo any extreme shifts.

After Delta-Gina finished summoning up the pertinent points on the revelation of psionic power, she began to explain how this crucial information tied to Journeyman.

[Reaching the rank of Journeyman proves that you are one of the few humans in the galaxy who possesses ability to grow and express your psionic potential. This is a pivotal development, as your achievement opens the way for you to advance to Master. In order to progress to that height, you must continually develop the design philosophy that your psionic power has merged with. The more potent, applicable and rigorous your design philosophy becomes, the closer you are to advancing to the rank of Senior Mech Designer!]

"What distinguishes a Journeyman from a Senior?" Ves asked.

[A Senior is distinct from a Journeyman by the range in which the metaphysical properties of their mechs are still in effect. A mech designed by a Journeyman can only maintain its full potential within several star sectors from the lead designers. Mechs designed by Seniors can encompass a much wider territory and are able to retain their full strength even when they are deployed a hundred star sectors away from the lead designers.]

"What about a Master?"

[Mechs designed by Masters are effective anywhere in the galaxy. Their metaphysical properties remain intact even if they are deployed hundreds of thousands of light-years away.]

All of this made a lot of sense to Ves! This was probably one of the biggest reasons why mech markets were so highly bound to their regions!

Delta-Gina began to instruct Ves more specifically on what he should do to advance to Senior. While her advice still remained rather vague and broad, it still fell in line with his own understanding of spirituality.

In short, he needed to work out stronger and more diverse applications of his design philosophy. The most common way that mech designers accomplished this was by finding compatible exotics that complimented the effects of their design philosophies.

Incorporating these exotics into his mech designs was only the most basic way of taking advantage of them. In order to advance for real, he needed to study the exotics through the perspective of his design philosophy and derive how these extraordinary materials worked. Only in this way would Ves be able to replicate their effects without incorporating the expensive materials in his own design.

"Ah."

That also fell in line with what he guessed. Exotics contained many profound and inexplicable effects. While it was hard to understand their operation, mech designers were unique in that they could derive their workings as long as their design philosophies matched with their properties.

[Exotic materials do not possess any psionic properties. However, the rules that make them extraordinary can also be applied to a mech design through the medium of psionics.]

Ves understood the way forward now, at least with regards to how the MTA saw it. Mech designers who advanced to Journeymen may have been able to manifest their psionic powers, but their application of it was very rough and sloppy.

Reaching Journeyman meant that they had only scratched the surface of what they were capable of. In order to unearth the possibilities that their design philosophies offered, they needed to develop a broader and more systematic understanding of what they were dealing with whenever they designed a mech.

At the beginning, newly-advanced Journeymen mostly applied their design philosophies on autopilot. How could they harness the powers they wielded if they were incapable of taking direct control?

### **Chapter 1260 Racing Against Time**

Spirituality and Psionics were basically two sides of the same coin. Ves called it spirituality. The MTA called it psionics. Yet no matter what name it carried, the MTA was aware of the existence of this metaphysical phenomenon.

Delta-Gina only offered a very basic explanation of the MTA's understanding of psionics. The android did not reveal anything more than needed to put Ves on the right path to working towards Senior.

Ves could tell that the MTA was very touchy about their research on psionic power. Delta-Gina flatly rejected all of his questions for greater clarifications. Unless he was a Master or a very highly-placed internal member of the MTA, he could forget about learning anything more.

Suffice to say, the MTA definitely knew more, but to what extent, Ves wasn't sure. It could be that Ves figured out a lot more than their own research teams assigned to study the phenomenon. He couldn't tell.

Privately, Ves figured that their understanding of psionics or spirituality had not reached a very advanced stage. Otherwise, the System wouldn't value it so much and they would have already figured out what he did to his mech designs.

Perhaps a single top research team figured out more, but they were so prized by the MTA that they were probably under heavy guard and isolation. The chances that Ves would ever come in touch with them was very low.

Overall, Ves fully understood why the MTA invited newly-advanced Journeymen to their sector headquarters. Not only did they want to impress the power of the MTA into the minds of these promising mech designers, but

they also wanted to ensure they were trustworthy enough to learn these secrets!

Ves had the idea that he might have been eligible to learn more secrets. If he hadn't tried his best to portray himself as a religious nut in front Professor Oodiv, he might have learned a couple more details about psionics!

What he learned so far was very basic and generalized! Aside from telling him to study exotics, the MTA did not teach him any other methods of advancing his rank!

Ves even doubted whether this method was applicable to him at all. His operation of his Spirituality was very different from that of another mech designer. He already developed a bunch of different techniques without studying any exotic materials.

Was his advancement path different from that of another mech designer?

The induction ceremony nearly came to an end. Delta-Gina offered some additional words to Ves.

[While the existence of psionic power is not an absolute secret, it is a very sensitive subject that must not be divulged. There is no proof that awareness of psionics improves an Apprentice Mech Designer's chance of advancing to Journeyman. On the contrary, it has always proven to be detrimental as Apprentices go through extreme but futile methods to acquire psionic potential.]

Ves was sympathetic to this explanation. Many norms who really wanted to become mech pilots subjected themselves to crazy, untested treatments that promised to improve their genetic aptitude.

None of them worked.

Still, Ves did not entirely agree with Delta-Gina. He already witnessed several cases where mech pilots who did not possess the potential to become expert pilots had nonetheless broken through to expert candidate or expert pilot!

If something like this could happen to mech pilots, then it could also happen to mech designers as well!

All in all, both Ves and the MTA developed their own understanding and weren't in the mood to share.

This was fine, as Ves was sure he would attract a lot of attention from the MTA if they ever suspected that he could contribute a lot in this field!

[Unlike genetic aptitude, psionic potential cannot be measured.] Delta-Gina added. [Its frequency of occurrence is so low that a large quantity of mech designers needs to be raised to increase the number of mech designers with exceptional psionic power. Education, mentorship and apprenticeships are therefore vital. The MTA rewards a small amount of merits to any mech designer who has successfully taught or mentored a mech designer who has advanced to Journeyman.]

Ves nodded in understanding. This already fell in line with some of his suspicions. It explained why there were way too many universities trying to pump out as many mech designers as possible.

It also explained why mech designers freely took in younger generations of mech designers under their wing.

The MTA wanted to elevate as many Masters as possible! While Journeymen and Seniors were already capable of designing remarkable mechs, all of their work was destined to decay into dust one day when they and their design philosophies died out!

Now that Delta-Gina completed his induction ritual, the android led him back to the exit of the Master Hall.

Ves passed by the same mechs he admired before, but he viewed them in a different light than before. These Master mechs possessed a special quality that possessed an exceptional degree of stability, especially in the case of the older mechs.

Perhaps some of their mech designers already died! Yet even if that was the case, they didn't look any weaker!

This observation put him in a thoughtful mood. When Ves was still an Apprentice, he thought that entering Journeyman was a grand achievement.

While that was still true, it was all temporal.

According to Delta-Gina, once a Journeyman or Senior died and failed to find an heir to their design philosophy, their mechs and mech designs lost their psionically-empowered strength.

What this meant was that if a mech designer wanted to leave behind a permanent and enduring legacy, they needed to work hard to advance to Master!

Right now, Ves wasn't qualified to learn how a Senior advanced to Master. He could make a few guesses, but they weren't relevant right now.

First, he needed to advance to Senior. Mech designers like Ves may have stepped into the extraordinary threshold, but they were still at a very preliminary stage. In order to elevate their mech designs to a higher level, they needed to take their design philosophies out of dummy mode and develop their own applications.

In other words, Ves should focus on improving the power and control of his design philosophy's manifestation!

Even if his path to advancement diverged from that of other mech designers, he knew that he couldn't avoid performing lots of research. Time spent on



studying exotics and his design seed's operation meant that he had less time to spend on designing mechs.

Mech designers needed to find a balance between deepening their design philosophy and applying it to their mech designs.

Certain people had it easier than others. He now knew the main reason why those with simpler and more straightforward design philosophies had an easier time to advance than others.

Those with Class I and Class IX design philosophies were so ambitious that they needed to perform a lot more research to achieve the same amount of progress as their other peers!

Naturally, if they ever managed to advance, then the amount of knowledge they've generated was far more comprehensive than usual!

All in all, in the perspective of the MTA, becoming a Journeyman only signified that they possessed a non-zero chance of realizing their design philosophies.

In this context, realizing a design philosophy took on a more literal meaning. Accomplishing this difficult endeavor meant that the works of Masters gained permanency, just like the impressive-looking mechs on display in the Master Hall.

As Ves and Delta-Gina left the Master Hall, another pair of mech designers along with an android entered the same place.

The two stepped onto a floater platform and rode it all the way to the upper surface of Halcyon Citadel.

The android remained absolutely still as Ves was still processing what he learned.

Overall, Ves gained a broader understanding of what the MTA stood for and what they worked towards.

While neither Professor Oodiv or Delta-Gina said any word about it, the MTA likely worked towards empowering the standards of mechs to the point where they stood equal to warships.

The MTA stood equal against the CFA only because the current consensus in human civilization heavily leaned towards mechs.

In the Age of Mechs, destructive warships that possessed an immense amount of firepower were relegated to the background! Mechs had been presented as a new and destructive means of waging war to much of humanity.

Overall, the introduction of mechs had indeed succeeded in ending the mass slaughter and genocide that characterized the preceeding era. Yet the MTA was very well aware that the current usage of mechs and the prohibition towards the use of warships was an artificial construct.

Human states only abided by the rules of the Big Two only because they would get punished if they didn't!

In any case, with the CFA assuming primary responsibility towards defending human space against alien civilizations, states don't require the power of warships anymore. As long as their enemies played by the same rules, mechs would continue to become the most predominant tool of warfare inside human space.

Yet how long would this social accord last?

As soon as enough states rebelled against this order, the side that stuck with mechs would inevitably lose. The balance also broke if aliens launched a major offensive against human space, to the extent that the CFA was no longer able to to halt the aggressors from ravaging human states!

In both cases, the power of warships was too great to withstand! Only weapons comparable to warships could withstand their might!

Mechs, as exceptional as they appeared to be, still fell short of matching the might of a vessel that massed thousands of times more than their piddling little frames!

One of the most popular arguments on the galactic net revolved around whether god pilots who piloted a god mech could defeat a modern human battleship.

Most people voted in favor of battleships. The power to annihilate a planet was so intimidating that hardly anyone could fathom a mech being able to defend against this kind of might!

The only instance where god mechs possessed a realistic chance of winning was if they could sneak up to a battleship and ravage the huge but lumbering vessel from within.

Other than that, there was very little chance that a mech or a formation of mechs could offer a fair fight against a warship!

Ves had already witnessed the might of warships against mechs before. A single destroyer could easily annihilate several mech companies with her shipboard guns before the latter could ever approach into effective range.

Although a destroyer was much more expensive to build compared to a couple of mech companies, she was ultimately more effective and convenient in projecting power.

Ves guessed that the MTA feared becoming irrelevant one day. The Association revolved entirely around mechs.

When mechs enjoyed their heyday, the MTA was at the height of its power.

When the use of mechs declined, the MTA would drastically weaken. There might even come a point where the organization dwindled into a relic of an earlier age!

Therefore, Ves believed that the MTA was racing against time. All of their policies seemed geared towards encouraging as much innovation and advancements as possible. The more Masters that emerged, the narrower the gap between mechs and warships.

Yet the CFA weren't sitting still either. Their research and development was just as potent as that of the MTA, and newer and better classes of warships constantly emerged each year.

For mechs to catch up to the might of warships was an extremely tall order!

Would the MTA succeed in their ambition? Ves wasn't sure. The Age of Mechs had lasted over four centuries. While humanity had firmly adjusted to the new order, some of the cracks were already beginning to show.

Now that much of the stigma against warships had faded with the passage of time, many states must be contemplating a return to their use. They were tired of being treated like kids by the Big Two!

This sentiment was especially strong among the citizens of the first-rate superstates!