

Chapter 1261 Centerpoint V

Ves returned to the Barracuda via a shuttle, leaving Delta-Gina behind to pick up and guide another mech designer.

"How has it been?" Gavin greeted his boss. "Did they force you to slit your palm and shake hands or something?"

"Nothing of the sort." Ves shook his head. "I can't say much about what I've been through, but it's mostly a bunch of formalities mixed with grand displays of the MTA's might."

"Makes sense. The MTA is really adamant about keeping every mech designer under their thumb. It's kind of weird how every mech designer accepts their dominion."

The MTA could hardly tolerate a rival organization that tries to govern mechs, Ves knew. They wanted to control as many mech designers as possible in order to harvest their gains when they advanced to Master.

"You should mind your words, Benny. We're still in MTA territory. Besides, the Association has done a lot more good than bad for the mech community."

"I'm not so sure about that. Why is the mech market the only place which requires such an extensive degree of supervision and regulation? You don't see the market for nutrient packs being governed by a tyrannical Nutrient Trade Association who send out entire warfleets against every manufacturer who rips off someone else's formulas."

"Nutrient packs are products which are inherently useful and always in demand. We both know that mechs aren't nearly as desirable."

The MTA and CFA forced every state to replace their warships with mechs. Those that didn't quickly got demolished. Under such a naked threat, states

could only begrudgingly hand over their bigger toys and start playing with smaller ones instead.

Though Ves had never thought about it too much, now that he witnessed the MTA's urgency in encouraging innovation, he had to admit that their nightmare might come to pass one day.

If mechs failed to develop into war machines that could effectively stand toe-to-toe with warships, the latter would inevitably make a return to human society.

While mechs would always have a place in the armed forces of a modern state, they'd be relegated to unimportant auxiliary units. Deprived of glory, attention and funding, mechs would become increasingly more invisible. The thriving mech industry would shrink to a fraction of its height, forcing countless mech designers to abandon their profession and become more mundane engineers.

The MTA wasn't about to let this come to pass. They put all of their hopes on mech designers who advanced and developed psionic powers that enabled them to go beyond the technical limitations of mechs.

Yet if the MTA could harness psionics, what about the CFA? What were they up to with regards to this mysterious force?

Ves knew that the CFA should definitely be aware of its existence. He even witnessed an experiment related to psionics on Aeon Corona VII. That meant that as early as three-hundred years ago, the CFA was already dabbling with this power!

Yet the warships the CFA employed to this day did not appear to possess any exceptional quality. They were huge, brutish vessels that solely relied on quantity and quality to unleash overwhelming might!

No matter what kind of metaphysical tricks were thrown at them, warships always managed to defeat exotic effects through sheer brute force!

Perhaps the CFA tried but failed to replicate the powers of a mech designer onto a shipwright. It could be that they decided to focus on a different application of psionics.

Whatever the case, the CFA was not obliged to imitate the MTA.

Gavin interrupted his musings. "Now that you've got your Journeyman certificate and galactic citizenship badge, are we done here?"

"Yup. I've finished my business with the MTA. We're free to leave the star system, but since we're here, we might as well stick around for a while."

While Ves still had an appointment with Master Olsen at Leemar, it wasn't too urgent. He doubted she cared if he arrived a week or two later.

"Let's enjoy what Centerpoint has to offer. It's not every day I get to visit the most prosperous star system in the Komodo Star Sector."

Centerpoint was truly the biggest nexus of trade in the region. Situated smack dab in the middle of the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony, it facilitated trade from all over the star sector and beyond.

Despite the huge costs associated with doing business at Centerpoint, a huge amount of cross-sector trade took place here. Huge trade fleets dumped extremely valuable goods from star sectors closer to the center of the galaxy while loading up their cargo holds with exotics and other specialty goods native to the Komodo Star Sector and the frontier.

This also meant that Centerpoint offered a lot of advanced goods and services that weren't native to the Komodo Star Sector or the galactic rim!

Naturally, not everyone could afford to pay for these goods and services. They were so expensive that only the internal personnel of the MTA and the

wealthy citizens of the two second-rate states could afford to spend that much money.

The Centerpoint System was an immense star system that hosted multiple stars, planets, space habitats and space stations. Many of them imposed strict requirements of entry.

For example, Centerpoint III was the exclusive reserve of mech designers working directly for the MTA. A lot of amazing mechs and mech designs emerged from Centerpoint III each day.

Ordinary mech designers from all over the star sector dreamt of being admitted to the planet and becoming an apprentice or assistant to one of the esteemed MTA mech designers who resided on this paradise planet.

Yet for as long as it was settled, Centerpoint III had never opened its doors to anyone but internal members of the MTA!

The same applied to several other planets and habitats in the system. Even settlements with looser requirements still limited entry based on tiers of galactic citizenship.

While Ves had recently been inducted as a galactic citizen himself, his paltry tier only allowed him access to a few additional places.

For all intents and purposes, Ves was barely better off than a space peasant in Centerpoint!

After studying various possible destinations, he decided to visit Centerpoint V first. He recalled that Charlotte gave him an invitation card to a certain club on the planet. He might as well see what it was all about.

"Please set course for Centerpoint V, captain."

"Will do, sir." Captain Silvestra nodded and passed on the orders. "Mr. Larkinson, since the Centerpoint System is strictly regulated, you aren't

allowed to bring along a heavy escort. The most the Greenfeather is allowed to dispatch are a number of guards on foot."

Ves shrugged. "That's fine. A star system that's directly under the control of the MTA won't be as insecure as Bentheim."

Certainly, Ves wasn't naive to think that Centerpoint was a bastion of law and order. However, no one should be brazen enough to sow chaos and destruction with mechs under the noses of the MTA.

With their next destination set, the Barracuda reunited with the Greenfeather and leisurely followed their assigned route to Centerpoint V.

In the meantime, Ves read up on the planet. It was a prosperous and densely-populated planet that thrived on tourism, trade and retail. Almost every part of Centerpoint V was open to everyone, giving space peasants a taste of life under the MTA.

Only a handful of cities and city districts limited access to galactic citizens. Ves was curious about some of these areas. He definitely intended to pay a visit to them and see what the fuss was all about.

"Galactic citizens sure hog all of the good stuff to themselves." Gavin commented.

"Most of the good stuff you are referring to is extremely expensive." Ves retorted. "Even if I saved up billions of credits, I can easily squander it within an hour if I go on a shopping spree."

A galactic citizen wasn't just an empty status. It was an acknowledgement that someone was productive and wealthy enough to afford better goods and services.

It took some time for Ves to arrive at Centerpoint V. No ship was allowed to enter within a certain range of the planet. Both the Barracuda and the

Greenfeather were forced to park in deep space while a transit shuttle arrived to pick up the passengers.

For this excursion, Ves decided to explore the planet with Lucky and a bunch of guards, though the latter pretty much served as window dressing.

"It's too bad I don't have my own men in place yet." He sighed.

The Avatars of Myth were still in the process of training competent guards. Therefore, his current protection detail consisted of guards dispatched by SASS as usual. While he had no complaints about the security company, he didn't want to rely on them forever.

Ves and his escorts first stopped by a space station acting as a transit hub before obtaining passage to the surface. They soon boarded a large transit shuttle that took them to a very busy spaceport on the ground.

He split up with Gavin here.

"I'm no use to you here." He explained. "Rather than see you hobnobbing with all the rich galactic citizens, I would rather perform some impromptu market research and figure out what attracts all these wealthy ponces and pretenders to this planet."

"Stay safe, Benny, and watch your spending."

"I know. You don't have to warn me. I'll call if I need help."

With Gavin walking off, Ves only had Lucky for companionship. He turned to his cat who padded on the floor of the spaceport like a regular mechanical cat.

"Are you excited, Lucky?"

"Meow."

"Yes, yes, of course I'll buy a batch of exotics for you. Just remember that stuff is vastly more expensive here. Don't think I'll be able to buy as much as I did on Bentheim."

While Lucky still acted standoffish in front of Ves, the cat had mellowed out a bit over the past few months.

Ves hoped to repair his relationship with his pet during this visit.

Ves and his company soon hailed a large aircar that brought them to a downtown district of a highly-populated city. The hustle and bustle of visitors and residents overwhelmed him a bit.

A large majority of visitors came from the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony!

While the two states were bitter rivals, neither of their citizens showed any hostility to each other.

A small portion of visitors were accompanied by their own guard details, but all of their weapons had been locked. The MTA maintained a visible security presence in the form of bots, guards and plenty of automated security systems.

With so much visible security, Ves felt kind of stupid for bringing along his own guards. They were really less than useless here. After some contemplation, he ordered his SASS guards to return to the Barracuda.

"Are you sure, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Just go. I really don't need you here, especially when your weapons are locked. Some of the places I want to visit will bar your entry anyway."

Ves felt much more discrete now that he wasn't being accompanied by a number of guards in bulky and eye-catching armor.

Now that he was alone with Lucky, he decided to visit some of the shopping streets first before he headed for Astralis Nightclub.

"There's still plenty of time before evening arrives."

In truth, none of the planets in the Centerpoint System were subject to a normal day-and-night cycle. With five suns orbiting in a very complex relationship to each other, all of the planets regularly enjoyed sunshine from at least one star.

If the MTA hadn't deployed satellites that enveloped each planet with a special energy shield, many surfaces would have been scorched by the sheer amount of heat and radiation radiating from multiple suns!

In fact, the energy shielding was so advanced that they even simulated a true day-and-night cycle!

That made life in Centerpoint much more convenient.

Chapter 1262 Sticker Shock

Ves leisurely explored a number of shopping streets, many of which catered to the wealthy, at least by the standards of the Komodo Star Sector.

Each store quoted their prices in mech credits, coalition credits and hex credits. A pitiful currency like the bright credit didn't even merit any mention.

Even so, many of the prices privately caused Ves to feel some distress!

[URRSLURF ICE CREAM]: 6.5 million coalition credits

[MTA Mech Souvenir]: 33.7 million coalition credits

[Odon Altis B-315 Mark III Authentic Mech Miniature]: 7.5 billion bright credits

Just a single luxury ice cream cone would already set him back by a fortune!

And this was on Centerpoint V, one of the few planets open to space peasants!

Even though these prices sounded like scams, plenty of people ordered this weirdly-named ice cream without blinking!

Ves wanted to puke. "How can people casually waste so much money?"

He felt more and more disturbed by the profligance of the people who frequented these kinds of shops. While there weren't actually that many of them, they still spent more than what an average citizen of the Bright Republic earned in a thousand years!

Part of the sticker shock he experienced came from his humble background. Even after he became a successful mech designer, he still thought of everything in bright credits.

It was only after he exited the luxury shopping streets and entered the more frequented ones that he started to see more saner prices. While the stores still catered to the citizens of second-rate states, at the very least Ves wouldn't go bankrupt if he ordered a few ice cream cones.

Of course, aside from visiting shops that sold consumer goods, Ves also took a look at stores that sold mechs.

All of the stores offered mechs imported from other star sectors or designed and produced by the MTA themselves. Many of the mechs being sold consisted of high-quality second-class mechs, the cheapest of which were premium mechs.

It cost a lot of money to import a mech to the Komodo Star Sector, so it made sense that the mech stores on Centerpoint V didn't offer anything cheap. Most mech buyers in the star sector would easily be able to find what they needed from locally-produced mechs.

Therefore, the local mech stores all opted to sell distinctive and unique mechs from different locales at very high markup prices.

Ves saw a potential opportunity here.

"My mechs are pretty distinctive as well. What would it be like if I was able to sell a mech in these kinds of stores in other star systems?"

He was pretty sure that no other mech designer possessed a design philosophy like his own. That meant he faced very little direct competition. Perhaps other mech designers may have found a way to make their mechs compelling by employing a different method, but when it came to charming mech pilots and observers with the X-Factor, only Ves could offer such a product!

"It won't be easy to convince these shops to sell my mechs." He judged. "A lot of profits mean there's a lot of competition. Every mech designer wants to enter their distribution network!"

Ves saw that every mech for sale in Centerpoint V consisted of second-class mechs. Third-class mechs weren't valuable or profitable enough for Centerpoint.

If Ves wanted a piece of the action that was taking place in these kinds of shops, then he had to design a second-class mech!

"I've never designed such an advanced and expensive mech before." He muttered and shook his head.

Each mech class was subject to different paradigms. Ves already had a taste of first-class mechs. The Terrans eschewed specialized mechs entirely because they could easily stuff all the toys they wanted on a single mech frame.

The Bright Republic on the other hand religiously adhered to specialized mechs. They needed to, because they could only design and manufacture a mech that was good in only a single area.

Second-class mechs sat somewhere in the middle, though they leaned closer towards specialized mechs. From what Ves knew of the Friday Coalition, they mostly employed specialized mechs but with different enhancements and augmentations.

For example, a swordsman mech could incorporate an energy shield in order to improve its defensive capabilities. The mech designer could also opt to improve its offensive capabilities instead by incorporating the design with an integrated laser weapon hardpoint.

Overall, second-class mechs were still based on distinctive mech archetypes. Their designers just added some extra in order to enhance their strengths, mitigate their weaknesses or add more versatility to their kits.

Could Ves design such a mech? He could, but not without some familiarization. He needed to study the prevailing customs, the higher performance standards, the most commonly deployed materials, the acceptable price ranges and the expectations of customers who buy such mechs.

Since Ves grew up in the Bright Republic, he was very familiar with the sensibilities of the third-class mech market.

While he paid some attention to the second-class mech market over the years, his market judgement with regards to this higher tier of mechs was still very lacking. Ves did not dare to act on his assumptions with regards to second-class mechs.

"I'll have to study the market more in depth or rely on a marketing expert native to the Friday Coalition." He judged.

For now, Ves had no plans to expand the LMC to the second-class mech market. Even though it was a lot more lucrative than selling third-class mechs, Ves did not possess a proper foundation to achieve genuine success.

Why did many Journeymen and Seniors choose to remain in the Bright Republic instead of migrating to the Friday Coalition? There were many reasons to do so, but the most important one was competition!

The Friday Coalition already brought up a huge amount of mech designers every year! Plenty of Journeymen, Seniors and even Masters dominated the existing mech market!

While it wasn't impossible for a mech designer from the Bright Republic to achieve success in the Friday Coalition, the native competition was simply too formidable. The graduates from the Leemar Institute of Technology and other prestigious universities were of a much higher caliber than those who graduated from a place like the Ansel University of Mech Design!

Thinking of how difficult it was to enter the second-class mech market spoiled his mood a bit. He didn't feel like visiting any further mech stores on Centerpoint V. He could hardly afford more than a single mech, and he could forget about offering up his own mechs here!

Instead, he decided to spend the rest of his afternoon visiting a huge indoor marketplace that was only accessible to galactic citizens.

This was because the marketplace only offered exotics for sale!

A significant amount of visitors consisted of Journeymen like Ves. He even spotted a few older people who clearly emanated the air of a Senior!

All of these mech designers gathered here to browse the wide variety of exotics and other extraordinary materials for sale. While the marketplace gathered specialty materials from all over the star sector and the frontier, the bulk of the supply originated from other star sectors!

Ves understood why so many high-ranking mech designers were so eager to shop at this venue. In order to progress their careers, they needed to find materials that were compatible with or reacted to their design philosophies.

Shopping for exotics on the galactic net didn't work. A projection of an exotic would never be able to convey their remarkable qualities to a mech designers.

No. Mech designers needed to be in close proximity to the samples. It was best if they could touch the samples, although that wasn't always possible if the materials were toxic or radioactive.

For this reason, many mech designers inside this exclusive marketplace dropped most of their airs and acted like normal people who were shopping for groceries. The only difference was that they were very picky about the vegetables they bought!

"Naturally, the prices here are high as well."

Some exotics were more expensive than others, but their rarity in the Komodo Star Sector meant that the shops and stalls charged very high markups!

Even if a certain material was a hundred times more expensive than normal, the shoppers had no choice but to grit their teeth and buy them if they believed that their purchase would help them improve!

"How extravagant, Lucky!" Ves said as he gaped at the prices of some of the more extravagant samples. "Not even the Reinald Republic is this greedy!"

"Meow!"

His cat had entered into a daze ever since he entered the marketplace alongside Ves. The cat's senses had been tingling constantly as its mineral sensors went haywire from all the valuable goods within reach!

"Don't think about it, Lucky!" Ves hissed to his pet. "There's no way you can get away with it! This facility is under the direct control of a company related to the MTA!"

From what Ves could tell from the various signs and other clues, the operator of the marketplace was a company owned by an internal member of the MTA.

Only such an owner would be able to operate such a lucrative venue that concentrated an incredible variety of high-grade exotics without fear!

If even Seniors bowed their heads when they entered, then Ves would definitely not think about starting any trouble!

"Don't wander off, Lucky. Security is too high here!"

Since Lucky was still drooling over all of the exotics on sale here, Ves saw an opportunity and picked up his cat.

This time Lucky didn't resist!

"Let's go see if we can find anything interesting to buy." He said as he petted Lucky's head.

"Meow!"

The two spent the next couple of hours browsing all the different stores and stalls selling exotics to well-heeled customers.

Ves quickly noticed a difference between the two. Most of the stores were owned by major companies and conglomerates doing business in multiple star sectors at once.

In contrast, those who rented the stalls were mostly prospectors, treasure hunters, independent trade companies and smaller companies.

The goods for sale in the stores were always categorized. Each customer could request an information sheet that explained all there was to know about a particular product. Most of the exotics for sale here were already known to humanity for hundreds if not thousands of years.

This was different for the exotics for sale at the various stalls. Most of them originated from the surrounding regions, and many of them were only recently discovered. Not a lot of data was available about them aside from some vague possibilities.

This always made buying these freshly-prospected exotics something of a gamble. Neither the buyer or seller were able to judge their true worth.

The best the seller could do was to use various clues to come to an estimated price and multiply it by a hundred and hope there was a sucker who was gullible enough to buy them. Since many of their goods were relatively new, they were also very rare, which meant that mech designers wouldn't easily be able to obtain another sample!

Because most of the goods sold in respectable stores far exceeded his budget, Ves decided to try his luck with the stalls instead. While Lucky kept his mineral sensors peeled for something extremely yummy, Ves discreetly extended his spiritual senses in order to detect whether they reacted to his Spirituality.

No dice. While Lucky found several exorbitantly-priced exotics that he really wanted to eat, Ves inspected thousands of samples, only to find nothing that reacted to his senses!

Ves frowned. "Is there really no exotic out there that compliments my specialty?"

After two hours of searching, Ves was just beginning to give up when his weary senses lightly tingled when he brushed past an ugly lump of rock.

"There's something unusual!"

He slowly halted and tried his best not to show his astonishment. The only reason why he didn't stop and turn around in an instant was because he didn't want the stall owner to rip him off!

Chapter 1263 Space Trash

Having roamed the marketplace for several hours, he witnessed many instances of obsessive mech designers forced to pay an exorbitant amount of money because they insisted on buying a specific exotic!

The more interest they showed, the more the shopkeepers ripped them off!

It actually amazed Ves that so many mech designers made the same mistake. Obviously, these mech designers had never operated their own businesses!

For this reason, Ves did not immediately demand to buy the ugly lump of rock that reacted to his senses. Instead, he leisurely browsed the wares of the neighboring stalls, showing a vague amount of interest for random chunks of ore and radioactive fluids contained in protective containers.

"What's this?" Ves asked as he picked up a transparent cube that encapsulated honeycombed rock.

"Ah, we call it the ancient larva hive." The bushy-bearded man behind the stall responded with a grin. "Our company found it on an uninhabited planet in the Independent State of Pillis. It immediately caught our notice when some of our sensors went fritz as we were establishing a mining operation on the surface. Once we've recovered the samples, we've analyzed them to the best of our abilities and haven't been able to find a match with existing exotics. This is likely because it consists of fossilized residue of an ancient hive that belonged to an extinct insectoid species."

The merchant blabbed on for a bit before Ves raised a hand.

"How much?"

"For that little sample? Seventy million cols."

Ves would have nothing left if he paid that sum!

"Twenty million cols!"

"Haha!" The merchant laughed. "Seventy million and no less. There's nothing else like it! We've scoured the entire planet for additional samples and only found a handful of remnants! You won't find anything similar in the star sector!"

Although the stall operators were open to bargaining, they only did so for well-known materials. They always held their ground when it came to selling rare and extremely unusual exotics! Even if their effects weren't all that strong, their rarity was enough of a reason for them to charge a higher price!

They were not afraid of being unable to sell their merchandise! Eventually, a mech designer desperate to achieve some progress would come and detect something promising in the goods. These unfortunate saps would empty their entire pockets in order to acquire an opportunity to progress their careers!

Naturally, Ves did his best not to appear this desperate. He wasn't even interested in the alien larva hive in the first place. He put the item back after his failed bargaining attempt and turned his gaze towards other items.

After picking up several other samples and inquiring after them, Ves eventually shook his head. "Sorry uncle, but your goods aren't worth it to me. Half of the so-called exotics you're offering is literal space trash!"

The bearded merchant unapologetically shrugged. "One man's trash is another man's treasure. That's enough of a reason to price them all accordingly."

Ves simply waved at the man and hovered over to the next stall.

After performing the same routine several times at three more stalls, he finally strolled over to the stall with the rock that reacted to his senses.

Even then, Ves first picked up a couple of other samples while he chatted with the woman who was seated behind the stall.

"Meow." Lucky made a grabbing motion to a fingernail-sized rock with a bloody red exterior.

"What's this? You want this little exotic?"

"Meow!"

Lucky wasn't putting on an act. He was definitely interested in the blood-red rock.

Even so, Ves only showed a vague amount of interest in the object, as if he saw it as nothing more than a curiosity. "What is this rock?"

"Personally, I call it the scarlet rock. It's proper designation is a serial number that is way too long for me to repeat."

"Where does it come from?"

"In the periphery of the Hegemony. That's all I'm willing to say."

"Any remarkable properties?"

"It can slightly enhance the sensitivity of sensor arrays. I've heard that one mech designer managed to increase the effectiveness of the sensors of his mech by two percent using this material."

"That's not a lot."

"Two percent can make a huge difference. Besides, no one knows what this material is fully capable of. Maybe you can obtain a twenty-percent boost if you manage to crack its secrets."

"That sounds unlikely."

Despite her claims, the merchant didn't really value it all that much. After a quick round of bargaining, Ves managed to obtain it for the modest price of 800,000 cols, which was way too much for a volatile material that could only boost the sensor performance of a mech by a tiny bump!

Still, for something that Lucky really wanted to it, this price was actually a steal! His gem cat never made a mistake when it came to judging the attraction of different materials.

In fact, Lucky was squirming with his grasp as soon as Ves closed the sale. The cat couldn't wait to munch on the blood-red rock!

"Quite a frisky mechanical pet you have there, customer." The woman noted. "Why don't you sell it to me? I can make sure it will make some cute young girl happy! How about a thousand cols?"

Ves smiled at the merchant. "You have a good eye. Sadly, he isn't for sale."

"Shame."

He browsed a few other goods, showing vague interest but not quite enough to open his wallet. Each time he put back a sample, he came tantalizingly closer to the odd grey rock that kept tingling his senses!

The closer he drifted to it, the calmer he acted. Finally, his fingers reached the rock. It was a little too big and unwieldy for him to pick it up with his hand, but that didn't prevent him from touching its surface.

"This looks like a random meteorite." He casually commented. "What makes it exotic?"

The woman shrugged. "We're not quite sure. Aside from a slightly-elevated energy level, the rock also caused a few people to become dizzy when they came into contact with it. It's not dangerous or anything, but we can't explain why some people reacted that way."

"How many people suffered this reaction?"

"A dozen or so."

"Out of how many?"

"I can't say."

"That doesn't sound like a lot."

Ves chit-chatted with the merchant. The woman really couldn't tell him anything more about the odd rock. As far as they could tell, it was a meteorite that crashed into a planet and laid inert for several hundred million years.

"While it's applications aren't much, it's an interesting puzzle. How much are you asking for this rock?"

"100 million cols, on account of its potential." The merchant replied.

"That's a ripoff! A rock that can make one in a thousand people or so feel dizzy for a second is hardly worth that much money! 1 million cols!"

"As I said, the rock may be useless, but who knows what mech designers like you can make of it. Maybe you'll be able to create a new weapon system that can make an entire crowd faint from a distance. 80 million cols!"

"Do I look like a Senior? If your best scientists haven't been able to figure out its secrets, I probably won't be able to figure out anything! 10 million cols!"

"Well, you're asking for it, right? Maybe you can defy the odds. 70 million cols!"

After several minutes of bargaining, the merchant agreed to hand it over for the sumptuous price of 35 million cols. This was almost equivalent to 3.5 billion bright credits, which was a very small price to pay for a material that reacted to his spiritual senses!

While he didn't necessarily have to keep up his act, Ves nonetheless maintained the same pattern. He walked over to a couple of other stalls and curiously perused the exotics on offer as if he hadn't purchased the most valuable item in the marketplace!

"Value is relative anyway. One man's treasure is another man's trash." He muttered.

Once the energy shielding above the sky began to fade to an evening setting, Ves finally emerged from the marketplace. He walked a few streets over and sat at a plaza.

"Here you go, Lucky!" He said as he passed on the scarlet rock.

"Meow!"

Lucky immediately snatched it with his maw and slowly crunched it with its teeth, savoring the taste of the bloody exotic.

Ves smiled as his cat began to purr.

"Do you forgive me now?"

His cat didn't squirm away or tried to jump from his grasp, which was a good sign he guessed.

As Lucky eagerly enjoyed his latest treat, Ves turned his attention to the hovering box that contained the grey rock. This was what he set out to buy in the first place. Although this wasn't the best place to examine it, Ves couldn't contain his curiosity!

"Let's see what makes you special!"

Just as he was about to open the box, someone suddenly coughed.

"Who?"

Ves turned around, only to see that a strange robed figure crept up behind his back!

"Heavens!"

"Mr. Larkinson, I presume?"

"That's me." Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion as he recognized the man's outfit. "You're a Shadow Courier, right?"

"Correct. I am tasked with conveying a message to you from the Skull Architect."

Ves almost jumped from his seat. "Don't mention that name here! In fact, why the hell did you show up in Centerpoint at all?!"

The shadow courier smirked behind his hood. "Your concerns are ill-founded, Mr. Larkinson. Even underneath the gaze of the MTA, we are still able to maintain discretion."

Indeed. A small and subtle interference field emanated from the Shadow Courier. However, that still didn't ease Ves' concerns!

"Your interference field is way too weak!"

"It is sufficient enough for our purposes. Do not underestimate our technology. The MTA may be powerful, but they aren't in the habit of placing their best sensors on a planet that caters to space peasants. Besides, do you think we don't count the MTA as our customers? We guarantee absolute discretion and reliability in delivering your messages or your money back!"

Ves quietly cursed. In any case, the deed had already been done. Since none of the nearby security bots had approached them, Ves would just assume that the MTA's monitoring system hadn't caught the Shadow Courier mentioning the nickname of one of their fugitives.

"Pass me the message quickly and leave!"

"Very well. The Skull Architect wants to convey a single message to you. Hurry up with your task and send back the work he expects from you as soon as possible!"

"I still have more than half a year before I reach the deadline!" Ves protested.

"That isn't good enough for the Skull Architect! He expects more from you!"

Ves wanted to wring the demanding mech designer's neck. Was the Skull Architect his father or something?!

"Tell him that I'll finish my work within the deadline."

"The Skull Architect has promised to offer you an incentive if you can deliver your work in half that time." The Shadow Courier said. "Of course, the quality of your work cannot be any less!"

"What kind of reward is in store if I meet this demand?"

"You will satisfy the Skull Architect and obtain his appreciation." The Shadow Courier flatly replied.

"GET OUT!"

Ves grumbled as the Shadow Courier faded away and left the plaza. What kind of stupid reward was the Skull Architect's gratitude? The pirate designer was a nutjob! The sooner Ves fulfilled his promises, he would cut ties right away!

"Who the hell hires a Shadow Courier just to convey a few words?!"

Shadow Couriers did not come cheap! For the Skull Architect to make use of them just to tell Ves to turn in his homework early was very weird!

"Is he in a hurry?" Ves speculated.

What could make him feel so urgent? Did the Skull Architect reevaluate his work or something?

Whatever the case, Ves would hand over his work when he finished it, and not before! He still had two more variants to complete, and who knows how long it would take for him to reach the end!

Chapter 1264 Galactic Citizen In Name

After shooing away the random Shadow Courier who popped out of nowhere, Ves turned his attention back to the grey rock. He opened up the box and reached out with his hand.

No reaction.

"What? I was sure there was something here!"

Ves puzzled over the rock he bought, refusing to believe his senses had foiled him. Yet as he continually probed the rock with his hands and his spiritual senses, he actually failed to uncover anything remarkable.

Had he misjudged? Had he been scammed?

He refused to believe so. There must be something special about this rock!

"Many mech designers require years of research in order to decipher some of the secrets behind exotics. It's nothing unusual for me to obtain no results upon a cursory examination."

After several minutes of fruitless examination, Ves closed the box and left the mystery for later. This was not the time and place to perform serious material research.

Instead, he decided to go to Astralis Nightclub.

"Come on, Lucky. Let's go see what Charlotte had in mind when she suggested that I should pay a visit there."

He hailed an aircar that swiftly brought Ves and Lucky to a fairly upscale district on Centerpoint V. Certain areas of the planet favored space peasants, while other areas favored galactic citizens.

This was definitely a city district that favored galactic citizens. Not only was security higher here, but the structures looked fancier as well.

Just like in the Friday Coalition, a lot of structures floated in the air. The architecture of many of the floating buildings incorporated radical three-dimensional designs.

For example, one floating park was shaped like a cube. Whereas old folk leisurely sat on the benches admiring the fading golden horizon, teenagers gleefully partied in a swimming pool on the bottom side of the floating park. The antigrav modules integrated in the park made sure to prevent the water and all the people from falling to their deaths!

Ves still shuddered at the sight. As long as something went wrong, either through disaster, sabotage or faulty maintenance, all of those people standing upside down hundreds of meters above the ground would certainly die!

"Well, maybe it won't come to that." He shook his head. "All of them are doubtlessly wearing smart clothing or other safeguards that can mitigate some of the risks."

The rich possessed numerous means to protect their lives. They had to because they faced equally capable enemies armed with much better weapons.

Therefore, while it seemed that CFA admirals and MTA councilors protected themselves with an array of shielding, teleporters, guards and other safeguards, the threats they protected against were equally as sophisticated!

"It's an arms race." He muttered. "There's never a point where someone is completely safe or completely dominant."

Perhaps the only time in humanity's history where this balance was skewed was during the latter days of the Age of Conquest. The infamous warfleets weren't capable of defending against the superweapons they themselves were armed with. No defensive shielding could withstand against a force that could crack a planet!

For this reason, warfare primarily devolved in a race to strike first and strike the hardest. Attacks against planets and wiping out whole industries and population centers became acceptable practice because the armchair admirals believed it was the only way to shake the foundation of a warfleet!

Yet the only outcome all of this slaughter had accomplished was to completely unmoor the warfleets of the losing side! Having lost the foundation of their support, they went completely bonkers and retaliated with a vengeance!

Ves shook his head. "That's old history. Such a thing won't happen today."

Humanity had made a lot of advancements in technology since then, particularly in the area of planetary shielding. The planetary shielding systems that protected every planet in the Centerpoint System weren't only there to protect the surface from the overlapping heat and radiation of multiple suns.

The planetary shielding systems could actually dial up their strength and withstand direct attacks!

Naturally, the amount of energy the shields expended in this mode was immense. Even with the Dyson spheres harvesting a significant portion of energy pumped out by the local suns, the shields would only be able to last a short time due to their incredible degree of inefficiency.

"In the end, it's much easier to destroy than to protect." He sighed.

Something else he noticed in this district was that a lot less people were on the streets. Ves could already tell that almost everyone here was a galactic citizen, and of a higher tier than that of Ves!

"Everyone here is either an internal member of the MTA or a dependent."

In truth, Ves felt somewhat out of place here. As a tier 12 galactic citizen, he still couldn't enter any of the shops and other venues in this district.

Encountering this situation really hit home that receiving galactic citizenship

had done little to close the gap between himself and most of the people who worked for the Big Two.

"It's as if tier 12 is only a galactic citizen in name."

Now that he thought about it, all of the expert pilots in the Larkinson Family should be galactic citizens as well. Yet none of them had mentioned a single thing about galactic citizens to their family members.

"It's probably because it doesn't really mean anything to the Larkinsons." He guessed.

There was no point giving other Larkinsons delusions of grandeur when the actual benefit to becoming a tier 12 galactic citizen really wasn't all that much. If galactic citizens were actually people of importance, then the Bright Republic and the other third-rate states would have been ruled by high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers.

Instead, people like Professor Ventag, Professor Velten, Professor Pendleton and so on voluntarily allowed themselves to be governed by an administration that consisted primarily of space peasants.

Ves came to an important conclusion. "Bottom tier galactic citizenship doesn't mean anything."

That was reflected from the attitudes of others in the vicinity.

When other galactic citizens saw him and realized his tier somehow, they didn't regard him as a galactic citizen. Instead, they viewed him as a jumped-up space peasant! Even if he came closer to matching the status of proper galactic citizens, a noticeable gap still existed!

"These people have a way to determine my citizenship tier."

Ves guessed that they had been fed with the information through implants or internal augmentations. Whereas most space peasants rightly eschewed

implants due to their propensity to being hacked or tampered with, galactic citizens didn't share the same worry because their faction's security precautions were already some of the best.

That reminded him that he obtained a sophisticated cranial implant himself. Ves still hadn't dared to implant it into his head due to its age and its origin.

"I should really do something about that. I can't let it rot in my vault forever."

He made a mental note to address it when he came back to Cloudy Curtain. Perhaps he could even ask for help from Calabast to find out where he could find a reliable expert that could check over the Archimedes Rubal.

"None of these galactic citizens have to worry about these concerns."

Even if the MTA installed backdoors in their implants, they both belonged to the same side. As long as their own people didn't betray the organization, there was very little harm in letting the Association follow their entire lives.

Ves wouldn't mind it either if he was just an average person. But he was not. He was a mech designer, and one that squirreled away a lot of secrets.

"In that regard, it's better if I wasn't a galactic citizen. At least no one pays attention to space peasants."

At his current state, Ves received the worst of both worlds. Not only did he face increased scrutiny, he also hadn't gained any important benefits that made his life easier.

As he thought over all of this, he flew into the air using his smart clothing and at the entrance of a large, classy three-dimensional palace. The place didn't seem to be highly-frequented, but numerous young and trendy-looking galactic citizens eagerly entered the club after passing a cursory security check.

When it was his time to enter, a distinct beep came from the scanning machine. The nearest guard approached him and reached out with his hand.

"Please present your invitation card, Mr. Larkinson."

Ves did so. The guard dutifully checked the authenticity of the invitation card before handing it back.

"Your card is valid. Please keep hold of it as you will need it to enter the Pit."

"The Pit?"

The guard already dismissed him, leaving Ves clueless of what he meant.

What was this Pit?

Once Ves entered the darkened interior of the club, modern music immediately blanketed his ears. While it was a bit too early before the real party started, plenty of young galactic citizens were already having a good time.

Ves ignored these kids and their mundane activities. Ever since he became a mech designer, he stopped chasing after simpler pleasures. The music, the merriment and the fun activities the club goers engaged in no longer tickled his interest.

How could they ever compete against the sublime pleasure of designing a good mech? Not only was his work a lot more profound, it also contributed to society.

If there was one lesson that Ves had learned from meeting with various Seniors, it was that their time was far too precious to waste on hedonism! Rather than drinking yourself stupid every night, he should instead endeavor to deepen his design philosophy.

Therefore, Ves ignored the sight of college-aged men and women having a good time and walked deeper into the club. A few signs directed him right

towards the heart of the building. Eventually, he reached a gate surrounded by several guards.

"Please present your invitation card."

Ves did so quietly.

"Everything checks out. Please enter the Pit."

The gate opened up, revealing an interior so dark that Ves couldn't sense a single thing inside. As Ves curiously stepped inside, Lucky suddenly squirmed in his grasp.

"Meow! Meow!"

"What do you mean? There's an anomaly in front of us? But I don't sense anything!"

As Ves plunged into the darkness, he suddenly felt a very weird suction! Both Ves and Lucky lost control of themselves as they plunged straight through a weird bubble, only to fall onto the floor of a very strange environment!

His floating box that followed behind him almost hit the ground as well, but stabilized in time to prevent a crash.

"Urgh. Why is the air different here?"

Ves quickly gathered his wits. Meanwhile, Lucky shook himself out of his lingering bliss at having eaten the scarlet rock and entered into a high alert.

Both of them immediately noticed that they had entered a huge hall! It was so huge that the entire Astralis Nightclub could comfortably fit inside this empty space!

"What is this place?!"

"Meow meow meow!"

"What? We just entered through a space portal and ended up somewhere underground?!"

A new voice suddenly sounded from behind Ves. "What a very clever pet."

Ves immediately turned around to see someone dressed in a similar uniform to Charlotte when she visited Cloudy Curtain. The newcomer was an officer of the MTA's Compliance Department!

"Welcome to the Pit, Mr Larkinson." The female officer smirked. "From your expression, I take it that you don't realize what that means. Did the mech pilot who issued your invitation card even tell you what's in store for you?"

"No.."

The mech officer grinned. "This is going to be good. Well, come with me. Let's prep you up as best as possible."

Ves reluctantly followed after the woman, uncertain of what was going on here. Now that he thought about it, blindly entering a place referred to as the Pit wasn't exactly wise.

What had Charlotte gotten him into this time?

Chapter 1265 Rim Guardians

As Ves followed the MTA mech officer to the end of the huge but barren underground hall, the woman started to explain the nature of the Pit.

"I am Lieutenant Rezzie Ferct. You can call me Lieutenant Ferct." She began.

"As for the Pit, the simplest way to put it is that you've an informal trial ground." She began.

"What makes it informal?"

"Because the MTA isn't officially involved in the running of this place. It's actually established by the Rim Guardians, which is a fraternity within the

Compliance Department. Pilot Hoffmeister who issued your invitation card is a new member. She received a card immediately upon entering our ranks."

Ves scratched his head. All of this was completely new to him. "What's the deal with the teleportation portal? Couldn't you have just allowed people to enter the Pit through an old-fashioned tunnel?"

"We can't do that. You see, the Rim Guardians aren't the only fraternities within the Compliance Department. Our most hated rivals are the Prime Humans. Their beliefs are completely opposed to ours, and we've clashed against each other plenty of times. Keeping the location of the Pit a secret will prevent those snobby brats from crashing the party."

Uh oh. It sounded as if Ves got dumped in the middle of another political dispute.

Every organization was plagued with division. Even the most outwardly cohesive states or companies had to deal with certain levels of opposition.

The MTA was so powerful and so huge that it was impossible for every member to agree on everything!

Even in the Ylvaine Protectorate where every citizen believed in the same religion still exhibited a lot of political infighting!

For an entity that was countless times larger and encompassed all of human space, the MTA must be rife with internal rivalry!

This played an especially huge problem to the MTA due to its more open and diversified recruitment policies.

In contrast, the CFA didn't suffer nearly as much from this problem because every human they recruited all shared similar backgrounds!

Seeing that he might have gotten involved in something, Ves needed to shed his ignorance as quickly as possible!

"What do these fraternities stand for?"

Lieutenant Ferct smiled. "The Rim Guardians of which I'm a part of is a fraternity that stands for equality. I'm sure you're aware that the MTA recruits from all over the galaxy, right? It doesn't matter whether a mech pilot or mech designer is rich or poor, the MTA should stand up for all of humanity. Yet.. in practice I think we've fallen short in practicing our ideals."

"The MTA cares a lot more about the galactic center than the galactic rim. Everyone knows that." Ves bluntly said.

"I agree. It's a sad reality that the MTA pours a lot more funding, resources and manpower into maintaining their standing in the galactic center instead of funneling them towards regions which are deprived of protection. Do you think the Terrans and the Rubarthans even need our protection?"

This must be one of the reasons why the MTA had been rather absent in the Komodo Star Sector. It was so unimportant to them that they didn't allocate sufficient resources to maintain a stronger presence in the local region!

"So I take it the Rim Guardians stands up for deprived areas like this star sector?"

"Correct. Specifically, we stand up for the entire galactic rim from where we originated." Lieutenant Ferct declared. "While some of the members of the MTA abandon their roots as soon as they obtain their new identities, mech pilots like Charlotte and I will never forget our old identities. We do our best to defend the interests of the people living in the galactic rim against those who take a dim view on them. Just because we aren't as prosperous doesn't mean that we deserve to be treated as serfs!"

"Is that what the so-called Prime Humans are advocating?"

The mech lieutenant chuckled. "Sounds obnoxious, right? The problem for us is that their ideology is actually part of the mainstream within the MTA. Our

organization has always focused its attention towards the center of the galaxy rather than the periphery."

Ves frowned. He had always heard that the Big Two were stuck-up, but it sounded as if the problem was actually a lot more severe!

"Is it because they see us as a burden or something?"

"That's a good guess, Mr. Larkinson. The Prime Humans mostly consists of old bloods and recruits who originated from the galactic center. They advocate that the MTA shouldn't be wasting so much energy trying to cover the huge but barren galactic rim. The Association is forced to allocate a disproportionate amount of resources to maintain a barely adequate presence in star sectors that could never afford so much protection."

Centerpoint System was a case in point. While Ves marveled at all the vast megastructures and planetary engineering projects, the cost of transforming and maintaining Centerpoint must have been immense!

"There are a lot of star sectors in the galactic rim." Ves noted.

"That's true, and that's what makes this problem so acute. A single MTA branch in the galactic center is effectively forced to subsidize dozens of branches in the galactic rim! Do you think the MTA's Komodo branch can sustain its military might from all of the earnings it makes off the trade taking place in Centerpoint? It's not enough!"

A single star system, no matter how busy it appeared, could never maintain so many expensive mechs, ships and defensive installations!

"What do the Prime Humans want, then?"

"They want to abandon the galactic rim outright. Pull the MTA out and focus their resources on maintaining control over the galactic center and the galactic heartland."

"What?!"

The lieutenant sardonically chuckled. "I reacted the same way when I initially heard that. The Prime Humans consider us parasites and don't want to waste any money on enforcing their rules to a bunch of smelly space peasants."

"Why would they push to cede control? That's a lot of territory they're giving up!"

"A lot of useless territory, you mean. While the galactic rim isn't completely worthless, it isn't valuable enough to merit such a heavy commitment in their eyes. Part of that is because they consider guarding the galactic rim to be a responsibility of the CFA."

"The CFA cares even less about mere mortals." Ves commented.

"True. When the Big Two were originally founded, they divided their responsibilities in two. The MTA was tasked with maintaining order within human space while the CFA took on the burden of defending humanity from external threats. However, the MTA has always been dominated by leaders who came from the galactic center, so most of their attention is directed to the same region. As for the CFA, their primary constituents are the true spaceborn clans that mainly roam in the galactic center."

Ves felt as if the galactic rim was being treated like an unwanted kid. The Big Two were like parents who did their best to neglect the ugly child!

"So if neither of the Big Two cares that much about the galactic rim, what would happen if the Prime Humans had their way?"

"I'm not sure." Lieutenant Ferct cracked her neck. "It's such a huge change that I don't think the Prime Humans even thought it through. My guess is that the galactic rim would eventually turn into frontier space again. Without a forceful MTA presence and with the CFA dithering by themselves, the

Komodo Star Sector would quickly descend into the same chaos and anarchy that is common in the frontier."

That was an alarming possibility to Ves! While he enjoyed some of the freedom of living in frontier space, he did not enjoy the constant danger and complete lack of security associated with lawless space!

"If that's true, then these Prime Humans sound like selfish idiots!"

"That's why fraternities like the Rim Guardians exist. If not for us, the MTA would have long withdrawn from the galactic rim."

As the two of them continued to talk, they eventually reached the end of the hall. A plan section of wall plating slid apart, allowing Ves and the mech lieutenant to pass into a plain corridor.

Ves grew more concerned at his surroundings. This place was very odd!

"Where are you taking me?" He asked.

"I'm taking you to the ready room where you'll be prepped for the coming trials. Don't worry, Mr. Larkinson. They aren't lethal most of the time. We just want to push your limits a little to see what you're capable of. We don't want to be involved with someone useless."

"I don't recall accepting any trials."

"You did so as soon as you used your invitation card to enter the portal. Once you're in the Pit, you're committed. We won't let you back out at this stage. Doing so is the same as pulling the MTA out of the galactic rim. It's just cowardly."

"I'm just a mech designer!" Ves protested.

The woman laughed. "Do you think I haven't read up on your record while we've been chatting? You're known to be a man of courage in your home state. Not only did you manage to earn numerous combat honors, but you've

also distinguished yourself as a passionate speaker! A mech designer like you is exactly what we need! Charlotte chose well when she passed her invitation card to you! As long as you pass the upcoming trials, she'll receive a hefty bonus."

Ves wanted to puke. Was Charlotte using him? What the hell was this all about?!

"What is the point of participating in these trials?! What's in it for me?"

Lieutenant Ferct eyed him with an intrigued expression. "Quite a lot, actually. While we can't turn you into an internal member of the MTA, we're capable of offering various rewards to you in exchange for certain services."

"What services are you looking for?"

"What else can we want from a mech designer? We're interested in your mech design ability!"

"Don't you have your own mech designers?" Ves furrowed his brows. "You're part of the MTA! You have access to some of the best mech designers in the galaxy!"

The lieutenant stopped and turned around to face him squarely. "We do, but not nearly as much as we like. I won't bore you with the details, but the Rim Guardians are always looking for additional assistance."

"I don't see how I could help." Ves replied while stroking Lucky's back. The cat had been wary ever since they entered the Pit. "I only design third-class mechs. Such machines are worse than useless in your hands."

"For now. Who can tell what happens in the future. Right now, you're just a Journeyman, but in fifty years you might become a Senior. In two-hundred years you might even advance to Master. By then, it shouldn't be too difficult for you to design a first-class mech."

"Is that all?" Ves asked suspiciously. "It sounds way too convoluted that you want to test me out when I'm at least several decades away before becoming remotely useful to your fraternity."

The mech lieutenant sighed. "That's true. There's another reason why we want to establish relationships with notable local mech designers. I can't state it right now. Let's wait until you pass the trials."

"What if I don't want to participate?"

"You die."

Well, that was certainly a compelling reason. As they resumed walking, Ves inwardly grumbled. He really wanted to find Charlotte and punch her in the face! Why did she dump Ves into this stupid place and force him to undergo some dangerous trials?!

As much as Ves objected to being coerced into participating, it wasn't as if anyone here cared about his feelings. He was very much aware that the Rim Guardians were very much a part of the MTA! A nobody like Ves who recently obtained the lowest tier of galactic citizenship could not object to them at all!

"Don't be glum, Mr. Larkinson. Many mech designers would love to be in your place! As long as you pass, all kinds of opportunities will open up to you in the future!"

"Whoopie." Ves said flatly.

Chapter 1266 Tristan Wesseling

Lieutenant Ferct deposited Ves and Lucky in the ready room.

When he entered the room, he saw that it was decorated just as plain and drab as the rest of the Pit. Despite the luxury and splendor on display in the rest of Centerpoint, the Rim Guardians deliberately eschewed any comfort.

Was it to introduce some hardships to its visitors? To make the Rim Guardians remember their humble origins? To state what they were fighting for?

Ves couldn't tell. As soon as the lieutenant left, Ves instantly turned his attention to the other occupants in the room.

"Hi."

None of the other people in the room reacted to his entry. They all eyed at him warily.

From their clothing and other signs, Ves could tell that the other people were Journeymen like him. They also seemed to come from various corners of the Komodo Star Sector.

Their ages varied a bit but none of them were too old. The Rim Guardians seemed to invite any mech designer with potential to take part in their trials.

"Hey you!" A friendlier-looking man called. "Come sit next to me. I could use the company."

Ves did so for lack of a better option. He approached the man and sat next to him on the plain metal bench. He was a little annoyed that the bench lacked any backrest. The Rim Guardians really took their Spartan interior design philosophy too far!

"You look like you're lost." The man remarked.

"That's because I am." Ves admitted. "I received an invitation card from someone, but didn't know what it meant. Ever since then, the lady who guided me only gave me some background information about the Rim Guardians before dumping me in this room."

A couple of people in the room sneered and laughed at him. Ves didn't mind this reaction. Considering the way this entire situation was set up, everyone in the room appeared to be his competitors.

The more they looked down on him, the higher the chance he could turn the tables against them in the upcoming trials!

Still, it was rather odd for this fellow to be so friendly to him. Ves made sure to keep his guard up and take everything he heard with a grain of salt.

It seemed the man could tell what Ves was thinking, because he offered a confident smile. "I'm not afraid of you. The others? They see how young you are and how you've been personally accompanied by one of the mech officers of the Rim Guardians. They're scared. They're shaking in their boots. Your entry means it will be that much harder for them to pass the trials!"

Ves frowned while he idly comforted Lucky. "You mean the trials will set us against each other?"

"You guessed it right. While even I'm not sure what kind of trials we're facing as the Rim Guardians always randomize them, in the end they're only looking to pass two of our current company. While I don't want to brag, I'm definitely assured of one of those slots!"

Wow. This guy was really confident! Ves could tell it wasn't a duplicitous act because he kept his spiritual senses peeled.

Ves did not sense any dishonesty from the mech designer, though that was just what he picked up from the surface. He was very leery about intruding on the spirituality of another mech designer!

"Ah, by the way, who are you? You don't appear to come from my state."

"I'm Ves Larkinson. I come from the Bright Republic. I just turned into a Journeyman recently."

"The Bright Republic, eh?" The man raised his eyebrow. "You're quite young for advancing to Journeyman so early. Who is your master or mentor?"

"I'm a nominal disciple of Master Carmin Olson of the Vermeer Group."

The man's eyes lit up. "I see! How fortunate! I met the esteemed Master a few times! She's a role model to me, you know! She's really remarkable for advancing to Master in just a single century!"

"You've met her?"

"Naturally." The man proudly patted his chest. "I am the great Tristan Wesseling! Have you heard of me?"

"No."

"No?" Tristan looked disappointed. "Are you even a real apprentice of Master Olson? How come you've never heard of me? I'm famous in the Friday Coalition!"

"I only visited the Friday Coalition for brief periods of time. I mostly work and live in the Bright Republic."

"Oh. You're one of those mech designers who stick to their homes. That's pretty patriotic of you. Well, since you really haven't heard of me, I guess I can forgive you. The reason why I'm famous is because I'm a direct disciple of Master Katzenberg!"

Ves widened his eyes. This Tristan was an Oleg-like figure! Not only that, but Tristan was already older and seemed to have advanced to Journeyman a while ago. The strength he exuded from his posture and his spirituality was very vigorous! His entire demeanor radiated confidence!

"I see. I've been rather remiss in my greeting."

"It's fine. We're both Journeymen. That already makes us equals. Only pretentious mech designers who haven't accomplished anything will lean on the reputation of their masters."

Becoming a direct disciple to a Master did not guarantee a mech designer's ascension to Journeyman. Aside from the problem of possessing psionic potential, a mech designer needed to put in a lot of effort into their studies and design work in order to crystallize their thoughts!

"If I recall, Master Katzenberg's specialty is exotic material substitution, right?"

Tristan nodded. "Right. Her mechs might not be the best performers, but they're some of the most cost-effective machines for sale in the Friday Coalition. Hardly anyone can beat their price-to-performance ratios!"

This was an extremely valuable strength that propelled Master Katzenberg into one of the most prominent Masters of the Friday Coalition. Even a second-rate state couldn't afford to be too wasteful when they equipped their mech forces!

"Have you inherited her design philosophy?"

"Yes. Although I'm not as nearly as good as her, I've learned a few of her tricks. I've even researched some material substitutions."

Ves found that to be very fascinating. What did it mean if multiple mech designers shared the same design philosophy? Did Tristan ever regret becoming a direct disciple?

In a way, direct disciples paid a heavy price to obtain a Master's personal guidance. Even though they enjoyed the intensive tutelage of some of the best teachers in the industry, they had been stripped of the opportunity to develop their own design philosophies.

Who knew what Tristan could come up with when he formed his own design philosophy. It could have been something completely unrelated to exotic material substitution.

Still, Tristan didn't seem regretful at all. The confident man enjoyed his success without any reserve.

"Have you met Oleg Vorn?" Ves asked.

"Oleg? Sure! He's rising really fast. Did you know he already advanced to Journeyman several years ago? That's too fast! He might even catch up with me. That's why I've never slacked off ever since he appeared on the scene! Do you know he's about to participate in the Rimward Games soon? He'll be off to represent the entire Komodo Star Sector soon!"

"I've heard."

It seemed that even Tristan regarded Oleg as an exceptional talent.

"You're really strange, you know." Tristan suddenly said while eyeing him in a speculating fashion. "A Journeyman like you shouldn't be unheard of. While you advanced later than Oleg, it's still respectably fast. There are lots of direct disciples who took a lot longer to breakthrough."

Ves modestly smiled. "As I said, I mostly keep to the Bright Republic. I have no plans of moving to the Friday Coalition or expanding my business there. You natives have already cornered the entire market anyway."

"That's right. You'll have to fight an uphill battle if you want to establish a foundation in the Friday Coalition's mech industry. Master Olson won't be able to help you in that regard."

Since Tristan seemed to be so open with answering his questions, Ves might as well take advantage of it. Who knew when he would ever get in touch with such a valuable font of information in the future?

"What exactly does it take for an immigrant mech designer to achieve success in the Friday Coalition's mech market?"

The slightly-older mech designer pursed his lips in thought. "You either have to come from a state that is equal or greater in power, or you have to become one of us. Being good at designing mechs isn't enough. Basically, most immigrants end up seeking a relationship with a local mech designer or businessman. Only by integrating into our society in such a fashion will the mech market treat you as an insider."

"I see."

Ves inadvertently thought back to Patricia Hoffmeister. Was this the driving reason why she was engaged with a mech designer from the Friday Coalition? Once she married a local, she could use her new family connections to gain better access to the Coalition's mech market!

"You know, if you're thinking about getting a piece of the action, I can hook you up with some mech designers." Tristan said with a sleazy grin. "While most mech designers from the Coalition look down on immigrants who come from third-rate states, anything is possible as long as you are talented."

Ves shook his head. "No thanks."

"Shame."

"Can we get back to the trials? What is it about them that makes them so attractive?"

"You don't know?"

"That's why I ask."

Tristan laughed. "You don't even know the main reason! That's funny! Hahaha!"

Ves waited until the mech designer had his fun. "Can you tell me now?"

"Okay, sure! Let me put it this way. The Rim Guardians are primarily composed of mech pilots from all over the galactic rim. Do you know how many star sectors that is? The galaxy is huge, and the galactic rim occupies the most extensive areas!"

"And this is important because...?"

"Just think about it. Forget about the entire galactic rim. Just consider the Komodo Star Sector and our neighboring two star sectors. The Rim Guardians are composed of members who originate in all three star sectors."

The implication suddenly dawned upon him. "The Rim Guardians must be running their own cross-sector distribution network! With members in every star sector, it's easy for them to set up their own collective trade channels between every star sector in the galactic rim!"

"Correct." Tristan nodded and gestured to the other mech designers in the ready room. "This is one of their main sources of revenue. The reason why mech designers like these lot are jumping at the opportunity to pass the trials is because they want access to this vast distribution network! As long as they pass and become an ally of the Rim Guardians, they'll be able to make use of the distribution network!"

"And thereby making it easier to expand their business into other star sectors!" Ves gasped.

To most Journeymen, it wasn't worthwhile to expand their businesses to another star sector. The various costs involved in engaging in inter-sector trade was way too high! Ves would have to be at least a Senior before he could think of expanding into the Vicious Mountain or Majestic Teal Star Sectors!

Yet if he became friends with the Rim Guardians, he could take advantage of their network to obtain more favorable fees or to exert stronger control over distant operations.

"This is just one of several benefits the Rim Guardians has to offer, Ves. Work hard to compete and pass the coming trials. I'll definitely obtain a slot. I don't want anyone else in this room to obtain the other remaining slot, so make sure to work hard and show off your design capabilities!"

Ves nodded perfunctory, but inwardly he was sweating a little. His spiritual energy still hadn't recovered to its peak! Would he be able to bring out his best in the upcoming trials despite lacking some energy?

Whatever the case, Ves needed to work even harder to overcome this handicap!

Chapter 1267 First Trial

Ves had a very fruitful chat with Tristan. The man may be the direct discipline to an esteemed Master, but he treated Ves no different from a peer.

That was not a coincidence.

Tristan openly disdained the other Journeymen Mech Designers in the ready room. All of the others came from third-rate states just like Ves. So why did Tristan treat the latecomer differently than the other mech designers invited by the Rim Guardians?

The most principal reason was his youth and demeanor. Even if Ves instinctively tried to make himself appear modest and unassuming in the company of unknown mech designers, there was no way he could hide his inherent confidence.

In any case, Ves gave away enough clues for Tristan to figure out there was something different. Hearing that Ves was related to Master Olson was the clincher.

From what Ves figured out from Tristan, a nominal disciple did not advance to Journeyman as fast as direct disciples.

Unlike the latter, Apprentices who only received occasional guidance needed to figure out the bulk of their design philosophies themselves. Although direct disciples needed to work hard as well, they benefited from a perennial guide who would always nudge them in the right direction, thereby preventing them from stalling or running into dead ends.

The Fridayman put it in a succinct fashion. "A direct disciple who advanced to Journeyman when they're twenty-five is notable, but not too attention-grabbing. For a nominal disciple to advance to Journeyman just before they turn thirty like you is a much bigger splash! Especially since you advanced when you just completed your fourth original design!"

Compared to Tristan who designed over a dozen original mechs, Ves could only briefly mention five of his own, which made him all the more remarkable.

Even the other mech designers listening silently to the two grew increasingly more alarmed. They began to recognize Ves as a genuine threat, which was exactly what he didn't want!

While Ves was grateful for the information he received, it wasn't for free. The questions that Tristan asked forced him to reveal more aspects about himself than he liked.

Still, it wasn't as if it was all that bad to show off his accomplishments. The other mech designers already looked less assured as they equated Ves as a mech designer who was as formidable as Tristan.

Whether their impressions were accurate or not, Ves didn't know. He knew too little about direct disciples and what advantages they held over other mech designers.

One thing was for sure. Tristan deliberately put on a friendly face and engaged Ves from the start for a reason. Why did the elite mech designer refuse to extend the same treatment to the other mech designers in the room?

It was because they weren't worth befriending. Although all of them were Journeymen, none of them held as much potential as Ves. While advancing early was not a guarantee that they would be able to advance to Senior or Master, it was still a very promising sign!

Enjoying this kind of treatment was exactly why Ves worked so hard to advance to Journeyman. Tristan was just one of the first who deliberately put down his airs in order to grow closer to Ves.

That was a very shrewd decision! Who knew if Tristan would be able to harvest a lot of gains from their friendship later down the line?

A small tone sounded in the ready room all of a sudden.

[The trials will begin in five minutes. Please prepare yourselves, mech designers.]

That caused everyone to sit up and become more alert. No matter if Ves and Tristan were prodigies among Journeymen, the others weren't vegetables! They possessed their own pride and confidence!

"Looks like the winnowing is about to begin." Tristan grinned as he rubbed his hands in anticipation. "I don't know what the Rim Guardians have in store, but I bet that their trials are a lot fancier than the tests I went through at Leemar. With all the amazing tech the fraternity has at their disposal, there's no way they'll put us through something boring!"

That caused some concern in Ves. He hadn't signed up for this in the first place! Even though it sounded nice to obtain access to the inter-sector distribution network of the Rim Guardians, he didn't forget that the fraternity was still a part of the MTA!

The very same organization that Ves wanted to distance from! While it sounded as if the Rim Guardians might be the friendliest of the bunch, growing closer to them also meant opposing the Prime Humans, the most powerful faction within the MTA!

Ves felt very mixed on what he should do in the upcoming trials. Part of him wanted to do his best, but his partially-depleted state would not allow that. Another part of him wanted to drag his feet, but the Rim Guardians might not appreciate such disrespect?

Eventually, he decided to just put whatever effort he could muster in the upcoming trials. With the handicap he suffered and all the arduous conditions required to design his best works, he was not about to produce an Aurora Titan or a Transcendent Messenger on the fly.

Another tone sounded before the door slid open. Lieutenant Ferct strode inside with a strong military stride. "Alright you softies, the trials are about to begin! We've already prepared the first trial ground. Remember, no matter what you're facing, all of us are watching. Let's start!"

Ves suddenly felt as if the bench underneath him disappeared. Before he knew it, he and every other mech designer suddenly fell into a portal that formed underneath their bodies!

Although Ves held on to Lucky, some kind of forcefield wrenched his pet out of his grasp. He only had the time to issue a brief warning before he was brought somewhere else!

"Don't eat my purchase, Lucky!"

"Meow!"

The teleportation happened in an instant. Less than a second passed before he landed roughly on his butt. He quickly sat up and beheld his new surroundings.

"What is this place?"

To his surprise, he emerged in what appeared to be the surface of a terraformed terrestrial planet. A very average sun shone over his head, heating up his dark hair. Wind brushed along his skin and grains of sand and soil fell from his pants as he climbed up to his feet.

Trees surrounded him from every direction. Birds and other wildlife flitted here and there, giving him the illusion that he had actually been teleported to an actual Earth-like planet.

Once he touched the bark of a tree, he could immediately tell that everything he saw was a falsehood. Having touched physical projections before, Ves could immediately tell the difference between real bark and a sophisticated physical resistance emulator that closely imitated the sensation that he should have felt.

Ves guessed that the Rim Guardians teleported him to a huge trial chamber similar to the one he first entered. The only difference was that it had come online now, presenting Ves with a huge simulated environment, the purpose of which still eluded him for the moment.

"I guess there's no point dithering around."

Knowing that this trial had some purpose, Ves just took off in a random direction. With no trails or distinguishing landmarks in sight and with fairly uneven terrain in the way, he did not have a good time in the forest.

He attempted to activate his comm in order to take advantage of some of its functions, but the blasted thing didn't even come online.

"It's blocked!"

In fact, none of his gadgets worked, including his smart clothes and his fancy shield generator! All of them turned inert!

Ves understood that he needed to rely on himself to get through this trial.

"Nothing will happen if I stay here. I better go and see what else this forest has to offer."

He leisurely walked forward and tried to navigate the forest. An hour passed without any significant change in scenery.

While he quickly got the sense that he was walking in a circle, any attempt at marking his passage by scuffing the ground, ripping off leaves or leaving marks on tree bark didn't help.

Upon a hunch, Ves even turned around and tried to retrace his steps, only to find out that his traces had been wiped out!

He was completely lost in the forest!

"This is getting kind of creepy!"

Even as an hour had passed, the environment hadn't changed at all. It seemed as if he would be stuck in the same situation no matter how many hours he spent wandering!

Was this some kind of survival test? But that made no sense! The Rim Guardians weren't looking for a mech pilot or a commando. Mech designers weren't known for their excellence in wilderness survival!

"Really, what is even the point of this stupid test?" Ves scratched his head.

He felt rather indignant about being jerked around without explicitly agreeing to do so. While he could continue to walk for a very long time, Ves no longer saw any point in it. The environment already made it clear that he only had another stretch of endless forest in store for him if he walked forward.

"Maybe I should stop thinking like someone dumped on a random planet and more like a mech designer."

What would a mech designer do when faced with an unknown environment?

"They wouldn't run around at random. Instead, they would focus on solving problems."

Ves had many problems, but the most pertinent one was that he didn't have a clue where he should go. The entire forest was so bland and uniform that he hardly knew which direction he should take.

"I should solve this problem first."

He looked around and began to inspect the trees. Now that he thought about it, some of them possessed a lot of branches. Some even looked sturdy enough to stand upon!

Should he climb one of them and reach the top in order to obtain a better view of the environment?

"It's better than wandering around."

He needed to find the right tree, though. Some weren't tall enough. Others didn't grow enough branches. Those that did often possessed gaps along their length that made it dangerous for him to climb.

However, after spending more than half an hour inspecting hundreds of trees, Ves did not find a single tree that appeared safe enough to climb all the way to the top! All of them featured huge gaps that Ves would not be able to overcome even if he jumped with all of his might!

It was then that he suddenly slapped his forehead. "Ugh! I'm a mech designer! If something isn't possible, I'll just have to build something to make it possible!"

An engineering solution was required. Ves studied one of the trees that looked the most promising and scanned its length.

The tall tree presented three noticeable gaps that Ves could not overcome unless he could climb his way up like a mutant with the power of a spider. While Ves possessed a strong, augmented body, why take the risk when he could engineer a safer solution?

Ves recalled he had seen a documentary once where someone stripped bark off some branches and turned it into rope.

While he hadn't paid that much attention to it back then, Ves figured it didn't hurt to try. The only worry he held was if anything he fashioned would hold up. Were physical projections truly sophisticated enough to hold his own weight?

"We'll, let's test it out."

Ves found some thin branches and broke them off with his bare hands. After that, he attempted to tear away the flexible if somewhat slippery bark before braiding them together into a thicker rope.

While his physical strength made the process easier, he still wished he had some tools. His hands and nails were undergoing a lot of strain as he clumsily fashioned himself some rope.

In order to test whether it was sound, he tied one end of it onto a sturdy tree branch and turned the other end in a loop.

After that, he placed his foot on the loop and tried to put more and more of his weight on this makeshift footrest.

It held. Even when he put his entire weight onto it, the rope which by all rights should have consisted of a physical projection comfortably held his entire weight!

"It works!"

The Starlight Megalodon's physical projection technology hadn't been nearly as strong. However, it was three centuries out of date. Who knew how many

advances had been made in the technology since the time of the battleship's disappearance.

The current situation was also different because the trial ground had been specifically designed to simulate a trial environment. It would make sense that it incorporated specialized physical projectors specifically designed for the purpose.

While this made his current plan workable, it also signified that the Rim Guardians could do a lot more with the tech!

Chapter 1268 Lithic

Once Ves enacted his plan and crudely fashioned a bit more rope, he began to summon up the courage to climb one of the trees. Although they looked like earth-species trees, they still looked taller than any tree on Cloudy Curtain!

Climbing them took a lot of nerve!

Still, if he wanted to find some hope of getting out of this seemingly endless forest, he needed a better view of his surroundings.

"Here goes nothing."

With his body weighed down by several coils of makeshift rope, he began the arduous task of climbing up the most hopeful-looking tree.

It took a long time as he was trying to be careful. He hadn't exactly done anything like this before, but for the most part Ves didn't feel a lot of peril, especially since he stopped looking down.

The riskiest portion came when he needed to overcome the three gaps. Each time, he uncoiled a rope and clumsily tried to throw them around a sturdy branch above.

His technique left much to be desired.

Still, as long as he kept hold of the rope, he could keep trying over and over again.

After twenty-three tries, Ves finally managed to loop the rope successfully around the branch.

With that done, he finagled his way upwards with the help of the rope. Although it was quite intense, he nonetheless felt a small amount of satisfaction for overcoming this challenge.

He chuckled a bit. "Here I am, a mech designer who designs mechs worth millions of credits enjoying the accomplishment of climbing a tree."

It was absurd how low he had fallen that he would feel actual pride for such a trivial solution. Ves shook his head and turned his attention back to his task. He still had to reach the top!

The rest of the climb proceeded without incident. He used the other two ropes he fashioned to bridge over the other gaps. He even held on to a spare coil of rope just in case.

Once he climbed past the tree cover and poked his head over most of the other trees, he beheld his simulated environment properly for the very first time!

A blue sky. An endless forest. An unmoving sun. A couple of birds. A tall and spiralling black tower.

That last one stuck out of the drab environment like a sore thumb!

"It looks a little ominous."

The tower resembled an evil wizard's hideouts like in the fantasy dramas. All sorts of unnecessary spikes and gruesome features had been worked across its surface.

Although it looked a bit intimidating, it was the only landmark in the forest worth investigating.

"Well, I know where I need to go now. The next problem is getting there."

Ves tried to estimate the distance and figured he needed to traverse at least ten kilometers without going astray. Considering that it was hard to maintain a straight path in the forest, he might need to climb a tree again after he walked for a while.

He figured he could use the makeshift ropes he made to help him maintain a straight path. If he weighed down one of the ends and threw them straight in front of him as he walked, he could at least rely on something a bit more solid than his judgement to maintain a single direction.

Shortly after he started climbing down, Ves suddenly felt his entire perspective starting to shift. His vision blurred for a moment before he ended up in a completely new environment!

He had returned to ground level. He stood in a small clearing. To one side was the forest. To the other side was the base of what must be the same tower he initially observed!

"Took you long enough to get here."

Ves turned his gaze towards the voice. Leaning against the side of the obsidian tower was Tristan! The other mech designer looked bored as he idly threw a snapped tree branch in the air.

Aside from Tristan, Ves quickly discerned that a couple of other mech designers arrived as well. In total, Ves was the fifth one to arrive.

Four more had yet to come, which meant they were still stuck in the forest.

Ves sheepishly smiled at himself. He understood that he hadn't exactly performed stellar in the first trial. He wasted an entire hour walking aimlessly

when he should have figured out rather quickly that it wouldn't get him anywhere.

Overall, the trial was meant to test a mech designer's judgement in the face of the unknown. It was a good way to approximate someone's decisiveness, ingenuity and willingness to bear some hardship.

Though it hadn't surprised Ves to see that Tristan easily made it out, the presence of the other mech designers showed that they weren't incompetent in the slightest.

A mech designer needed to be at least somewhat resourceful if they wanted to advance to Journeyman while they were still in their prime!

A plodding and indecisive mech designer did not have what it took to swim against the current!

As Ves approached Tristan, the other mech designer said something surprising.

"I'm not the first one to arrive. When I teleported to the tower, that guy over there was already here."

Tristan jerked his head towards a man who wore his dark hair long. His body was lean and thin, but his black ensemble contrasting against his pale skin made him look like a corpse.

"Do you know who he is, Tristan?"

"I didn't realize it earlier, but if my guess isn't wrong, he's a Hexer!"

That caused Ves and the others present in the clearing to widen their eyes at the mech designer in question!

For his part, the Hexer grinned at them before ignoring their astonished glances.

The Hexadric Hegemony had always been a massive presence in the Komodo Star Sector. It stood equal to the Friday Coalition but its policies were completely different.

While the Friday Coalition interacted with the rest of the star sector with varying degrees of openness, the Hegemony was a lot less approachable. It only treated with a limited number of states, causing it to become a mysterious state in the eyes of many people.

Even Ves didn't know much about the Hegemony other than what he learned at school.

Tristan stared seriously at the pale Hexer. "He's mine."

Ves shrugged. "Be my guest."

The rivalry between Hexers and Fridaymen was almost as acrimonious as the rivalry between Brighters and Vesians.

However, whereas the latter was basically the star sector's equivalent of a schoolyard spat, the former had wide implications that could easily change the face of the entire region!

Neither Ves nor Tristan knew the Hexer's name, identity or origin. The man didn't exactly volunteer the information.

The hexer was basically following the plan that Ves would have adopted at first. By putting on an act and denying competitors any useful information, the man silently exerted the pressure of uncertainty on the others.

Even Ves wasn't immune as several doubts sprung up in his mind. The Hexer did not look friendly at all!

"He doesn't appear to be apprenticed to a Master, though." Tristan quietly said. "He would have confronted me directly if that was the case. That doesn't

mean he's a pushover. He's a Journeyman, after all, and his foundation is a lot better than the rest."

That was true. If Ves ever faced off against the Hexer in a design duel or something, he would have a real fight on his hands.

Still, it didn't appear as if the Rim Guardians were planning to do something as boring as that, at least not as first.

Ves and Tristan quietly waited for another two hours or so. One more mech designer teleported to the clearing midway, but no one else arrived.

Night suddenly fell.

The shift was so abrupt that everyone became alarmed! Aside from the soft glow emanating from the surface of the tower, the rest of the forest descended into near-complete darkness!

"I think the first trial has ended. The other three won't be taking part in what comes next." Tristan stated as he pushed himself off against the surface of the tower.

As everyone started to calm themselves down and figure out what they should do next, a mechanism at the base of the tower slowly rumbled. A section of the wall sunk below the ground, presenting everyone with an entrance into the ominous tower.

Although the dark and evil-looking tower didn't exactly look inviting, everyone wordlessly entered. Once they walked inside, they emerged in a hollow, dusty chamber that resembled an ancient abandoned dungeon.

The cylindrical chamber was completely empty aside from the torches lining the circular wall and the heap of giant mech parts dumped in the center.

"What is this?" One of the mech designers asked and approached the pile of broken parts.

Ves and the others stood back in case the junk pile was a trap. They were more than content with letting someone else make the first move.

The man who approached inspected the parts for a while before uttering a cry in alarm. "What the hell?! These mech parts aren't based off any paradigms I know of! They're not mechanical!"

That caused the other mech designers to approach the pile of parts themselves. As Ves touched their surface, he sensed that it wasn't metallic at all. Instead, it felt like stone!

As Ves studied one of the cross-sections of a broken mech limb, he found out that its insides consisted of a mix of rock and crystals, which was completely unlike anything that Ves had seen before!

"Is this even a mech?" One of the two female mech designers asked.

"That's an interesting question. The definition of mech doesn't specify the materials it should consist of. Even if a mech is made of flesh and bone, it still matches the definition as long as it can be piloted!"

This philosophical question helped everyone adjust to the fact that they were facing actual mech parts regardless of their weird technological base.

The question was what they should do now that they encountered one.

"I think we should work together to build a functioning mech." Tristan said.

"Just look at this chamber. There's no way up, and the entrance has been closed. Considering how we passed the previous test, it's obvious we need to pass a condition in order to advance to the next trial."

Ves nodded in agreement. "We're all mech designers. When confronted with a pile of parts, I think it's a given we should put our skills to use."

"Uh, should we each build our own machines, or should we pool our efforts together to build a single mech?" Someone else asked.

That was a good question. Everyone fell silent as they beheld the pile of parts. Ves circled around it and slowly judged that it was enough to build four complete mechs at most.

"Can we even build a mech at all? Just look at the size of these parts! They're just as heavy as regular mech parts! I don't see any bots, tools or lifter devices around here. There's no way we can use our own strength to lift any of these parts!"

Ves grimaced as he thought about trying to piece together a mech using manual power.

It simply couldn't be done!

However, the Hexer suddenly spoke up. "Why should that be true? This is a simulated environment. Everything around us is a physical projection under the control of someone else. They can decide to make a part as heavy or light as they wish."

In order to prove his point, the Hexer approached a half-broken mech head and gripped its bottom lip. To the astonishment of the others, the Hexer managed to lift the object that was many times larger than his body as if he possessed super strength!

The mech designer quickly let go though as the weight was a bit too much to bear for a single human.

Tristan scratched his chin. "Even if these parts are lighter than they ought to be, they're still too heavy for us to lift by ourselves. We need to work together and even then we'll have to cobble something up to make use of mechanical advantage to move the heaviest parts."

Did that mean they needed to work together? Would one mech do, or did they need to piece together four mechs?

Chapter 1269 The Hexer

After every mech designer examined the pile of parts and shared their observations, they came up with several conclusions.

None of the people present in this simulated chamber were stupid. Each of them were Journeymen with their own distinctive specialties.

"Many of the parts can be lifted by three or four people, but some are just too difficult. At least all six of us need to work together to move some of the heavier parts."

"The technological principles behind this stone tech are completely alien. They don't conform to any orthodox human tech."

"If we can enter the cockpit of these mechs and find a way to activate a system, we might be able to decipher some of the workings and principles behind these broken mechs."

"We don't have any tools on hand. However, the junk pile does contain some extra parts. Maybe we can improvise in order to turn them into something useful."

"I don't think I can reconstruct an alien mech alone. My specialty doesn't cover every aspect that we need to address to piece together a working mech from all of this junk."

This was a very serious problem. After some hesitation, every mech designer shared their specialties with each other.

Tristan began first. "As you know, my specialty is exotic material substitution. Although I'm not used to seeing lithic materials used in mech components, I'm confident I can figure them out to the point where I can repair them and restore some of their functionality."

That immediately turned him into the most vital mech designer in their company. When it came to materials science, there was hardly anyone who could match his prowess in this field!

Not even Ves believed he could outmatch Tristan in this regard even if he knew a thing or two about crystallography. The only way he could outmatch Tristan in some areas was if he upgraded his Skills.

Of course, he would never do such a thing during a trial where everything was under observation!

The hexer spoke next. "My focus lies in miniaturization, particularly when it comes to the internal architecture of a mech. I'm very confident I can figure out the nature of the internal parts and how they can be repaired."

"My specialty is software-hardware integration. Whatever programming these alien mechs run on, I doubt it will take me long to figure them out."

"I'm specialized in laser weapons. Some of the weapons in this junk pile share the same principles as laser cannons. I can fix them up to turn them into usable weapons."

"My specialty is related to mechanics. The parts here are quite different and not a single mech we can build is coherent. I can help adjust the parts so that they can work together in a single frame despite their differences."

Everyone turned to Ves. "What's your specialty?"

"..Metaphysical man-machine symbiosis."

Predictably, everyone looked stumped. Even the Hexer showed some mild incomprehension.

"Does that mean your specialty lies in neural interfaces?"

"Not really. The one way to describe my specialty is that I try to increase the compatibility between the mech and mech pilot through non-technological methods."

"..."

Out of the six mech designers still remaining in the trial, only Ves possessed a specialty that sounded useless! Everyone else possessed valuable expertise that they would doubtlessly have to rely on to turn the stone mech parts into working mechs!

Someone made a very pertinent observation. "There are six of us but only enough parts for four complete mechs."

Did that mean that only four mech designers would pass this trial?

"I think this is a test of our ability to cooperate." One of the women murmured. "There are five useful mech designers and only four potential mechs we can build. We still need the strength of all six of us in order to lift the heaviest parts, even if we make use of levers."

Everyone grimaced, Ves most of all. Compared to the other mech designers, his specialty didn't sound very relevant at all! While he was sure he was good enough to manage regardless, the others didn't believe so! They expressed little confidence in his usefulness! Even Tristan appeared a bit doubtful!

A subtle tension descended in the chamber. Aside from turning everyone dismissive towards Ves, they also eyed each other, trying to determine who should be the other mech designer to miss out on a completed mech.

Ves abruptly clapped his hands, interrupting the staring contest. "Ladies, gentlemen, we're mech designers, are we not? The mechs aren't going to fix themselves anytime soon. Instead of risking a falling out right at the start, why not pool our efforts and put the mechs together first? We can have our pissing

match after we complete the mechs. For now, I think giving everyone hope of passing this trial is better to ensure that everyone will do their best."

"I agree." Tristan nodded. "All of us are still needed. Until the mechs are complete, I don't want to see any discord."

The hexer wordlessly nodded. The others had no choice but to go along with this arrangement. It helped that this solution still gave the weaker ones some hope of passing the trials.

All of them spread out and went to work on examining the strange mech parts. The hexer approached a torn-open torso in order to study its internal parts, while Tristan approached a shorn-off arm to examine the stone and crystal materials.

One of the two women entered the cockpit in order to see whether she could summon an interface.

As for Ves? While he was sure he could contribute to the salvaging and repair effort in his own way, no one trusted his competence in areas outside his expertise.

Perhaps they wouldn't mind as much if they were working with normal human mech parts, but that wasn't the case! These lithic mech parts were very weird and operated on completely different technological paradigms!

It was better to leave the unknown to experts who were deeply knowledgeable in their chosen fields.

Since no one trusted him to work on his own, he instead approached each mech designer and see if they could use some help.

At the very least, serving as a sounding board for their ideas enabled mech designers like Tristan to process their thoughts more efficiently.

Ves even approached the hexer after some hesitation. Fortunately, the man seemed awfully engrossed in studying the insides of the alien mech.

"Your caution is amusing." The hexer said with a smile as he studied what appeared to be a stone version of a power reactor. "Are citizens of the Hexadric Hegemony that frightening to outsiders?"

Ves frowned a bit. "You don't know?"

"To be honest, this is the first time I have traveled outside Hegemony space."

The Hexer traveled to Centerpoint for the same reason as Ves. If not for the MTA's summons, the man would have probably remained in his own state.

"What's your name, if I may ask?"

"Goz Zoza. Before you ask, I'm an independent mech designer. I'm not connected to any of the six dynasties."

"We don't hear a lot from the Hegemony. Most of us only know that your state is strong and ruled by matriarchs. It's also the biggest rival to the Friday Coalition."

"Ah. Is the last one a major concern to you because your state and many other states are aligned with the Friday Coalition?"

"I do have to admit I have that inclination."

Goz smirked at Ves. "Perhaps you are right to be wary. We are no friends with the Friday Coalition, and we do not have the best impression of states that suck up to our rivals."

"The Hegemony isn't very approachable."

"True. Regardless, the Coalition and all of its dependents are still our enemies. For now though, hostilities haven't broken out, so I will reluctantly tolerate your presence."

"I'm very grateful." Ves dryly replied.

What a friendly mech designer. He already regretted approaching the hexer.

"Are you surprised that I'm a man? You outsiders all seem to think that I should be a woman."

"Well, the thought has crossed my mind."

"Just because our people believe in the primacy of women doesn't mean we believe that men can be just as good in some areas."

Ves wanted to scratch his head. "Then why do women get to be in charge of your state? For as long as I heard, it's always the matriarchs who are in charge."

"That's because there is a long line of historical proof that male leaders are no good. Men are too prone to making impulsive decisions and listening to their pride rather than their reason. Throughout much of humanity's history, we've been overwhelmingly led by men, and look where that has taken us! We were on the brink of exterminating our own race at the end of the Age of Conquest!"

"Many infamous admirals were female, you know." Ves retorted.

"That's due to their runaway genetic modification! Even so, if you look at the proportion of male and female admirals who have gone rogue or committed major crimes against humanity, you'll find that the women among their ranks were much more restrained!"

"Is that so? I haven't studied that."

"It's true. This is a matter of public record. In any case, we believe that human society can't remain under the thumb of men. Our gender is prone to making decisions that we later regret. It's baked into our very DNA. Since the earlier days of our race, men were hunters and warriors while women took care of the household. While humanity has advanced far beyond our primitive roots,

many of its vestiges still remain in our genes! Men are more suitable to fight while women are more suitable to lead!"

The slight fervor in Goz Zoza's voice made it clear that he wasn't parroting what he learned by rote. The hexer truly believed in what he said!

"I don't think most people agree. Haven't we moved beyond gender difference?"

Goz shook his head. "Technology and other societal advancements has narrowed the gap, but that still doesn't resolve the differences at the top. I'd rather answer to a woman than a man! At least the former is much more capable of making wise decisions!"

"Women can be just as irrational as men."

"Yes, but they manifest in different ways. Men can be prideful, greedy and lustful. Women are motherly, protective and empathic! Us men are incapable of caring for ourselves, Brighter. It is better to leave the actual decision-making to women!"

That sounded incredibly biased to Ves! How could Goz be smart enough to advance to Journeyman but be completely off-kilter when it came to gender differences? The opinions he spouted sounded like outright pseudoscience!

"If you believe that women are superior, why hasn't the Hegemony done away with men entirely?" Ves asked.

The other mech designer smiled sardonically. "And leave women alone to shoulder the burden themselves? I think not. All-female societies are even worse than male-dominated societies. For better or worse, humanity functions best when there are multiple genders living in harmony. The same holds true for quite a few alien races as well. Men are still fine in many areas of society. Women are simply better, especially when they are in charge."

Ves didn't know what to say about Goz's strange belief. The Hegemony did a good job in brainwashing their men! If a male Hexer was already this bad, then Ves didn't want to see what their women were like!

A few minutes passed by as Goz quietly kept examining all the internal components. Occasionally, he would describe something, prompting Ves to add his own thoughts.

"You're quite knowledgeable about internal architecture." Goz complimented Ves.

"Thanks."

"However, you're of no use to me here. Why don't you go somewhere else and lend a hand to someone who actually needs help?"

"Okay. I'll go then."

Ves had enough of the hexer anyway. No wonder the Friday Coalition couldn't stand the Hexadric Hegemony!

Chapter 1270 Civilized Mech Designer The Mech Touch

Work proceeded slowly but steadily. While nobody understood the principles behind the lithic mech parts, that didn't stop them from figuring them out step by step.

One of the biggest breakthroughs they accomplished was when a couple of mech designers managed to get the cockpit systems online. While the screens were full of gibberish alien symbols, the interface at least gave the software specialist a lot of areas to explore.

The small amount of gains they obtained from the cockpit interface gave the other mech designers a better idea of what they were dealing with. It turned out that the lithic mechs weren't not so different from human mechs after all.

"It's as if some alien race saw humans playing around with mechs and tried to make their own version of it by using their own tech base." The software specialist said. "They probably obtained some human mechs and plagiarized their design elements to come up with these mechs."

Tristan lit up at that. "So other than the strange materials and unusual tech, they are built just like human mechs!"

Everyone perked up at that. If that was true, then figuring out how this mech worked would be a lot easier!

Ves got the idea that these lithic mechs must have existed for real. The principles they worked on were very sound. He could even imagine human mech designers trying to adapt mechs to lithic technology in case there was a need to deploy mechs in anomalous areas where regular mechs faltered.

Still, even if they shared the same roots with orthodox human mechs, the mech designers still needed to employ all of their smarts in order to come up with various solutions.

Hours passed as they slowly began to come up with a plan of action. They first separated every mech part from the junk pile by lifting them off one by one. After that, they inspected the parts and marked out which ones looked sound enough to be used and which ones should be scrapped.

For the parts destined to be scrapped, Ves and the others turned them into various crude tools.

"It's not much, but this is all we can manage."

After continuous study, Tristan finally made a second breakthrough that vastly increased their chances of restoring the mechs.

"These stone parts can merge and restore themselves in the right conditions!"

That was important, because they didn't possess any tools or machines that could fuse the parts together. Although the organic repair ability of the stone parts weren't very strong, it at least removed the largest stumbling block to their ambition to restore four complete mechs.

Time slowly went by as the mechs began to take shape. With Tristan's help, they started to piece together the parts. The work went slowly though as they all needed to exert their full physical might to move some the parts together.

Ves had the sense that they would have never been able to accomplish this if they faced the real thing instead of physical projections. Not only would the parts be much heavier, but Ves was pretty certain that they didn't originally possess the ability to organically repair themselves.

Still, he wasn't complaining. The artificial conveniences massively sped up their repair efforts. After almost an entire day of working, throughout which they took frequent pauses as food and some other amenities were occasionally made available, the mechs slowly took shape.

Of course, they needed to move a lot of heavy parts around. As the most 'useless' mech designer of the group, Ves had been relegated to a mule. He was involved with moving nearly every part. Even if he didn't want to, the collective pressure from the other mech designers gave him no choice but to go along with this arrangement.

Ves actually didn't exert himself that much, as he had plenty more strength to spare. He still pretended to be winded though, as he suspected that was what the others wanted to see from him. As long as all of the exertions tired him out at the end, he wouldn't have the energy to contest for ownership of the mechs.

The different mech designers already started jostling for ownership of some of the mechs.

For example, Tristan had taken a liking for a machine that appeared to be built as a knight mech. It possessed the most solid structure and gave the most room for his specialty to come into play.

Goz Zoza preferred the only light mech instead. While it seemed smaller and weaker than the other mech frames, it weighed substantially less as well and that made it very fast and agile.

The other two mechs consisted of a frontline mech with energy cannon barrels taking the place of its forearms and a fairly plain rifleman mech.

Ves found the latter two mechs to be fairly interesting because he observed a lot of familiar aspects in the crystal tech at the heart of their weapon systems.

The mech designer who specialized in laser weapons still couldn't get them to work yet. Even though her specialty was quite deep, she never dealt with crystal tech before and had to waste valuable time trying to reinvent the wheel.

Despite this minor snag, the mech frames eventually formed into cohesive mechs. They even manage to activate them all and test whether the mech had connected to all of its parts and limbs. They didn't dare do more than that. None of them had a mech pilot on hand, and even if they did, they were wary of connecting a human to an alien mech.

While everyone still needed to do some work, particularly in getting the laser weapons to work, all six of them slowed down.

The cooperative spirit between them all had slowly faded the closer they neared completion. At this stage, everyone was already starting to jostle for possession of one of the four mechs. They were convinced that the Rim Guardians would only allow four of them to pass this trial, meaning that two among their ranks would have to give up the opportunity to earn the fraternity's friendship!

"I don't care what the rest of you are doing, but this mech is mine." Goz suddenly declared and patted the mostly-complete light mech's frame.

Tristan quickly followed suit. "If you think you can compete with me for this knight mech, feel free to do so if you think you can bear the consequences."

That left three other mech designers and Ves competing over the frontline mech and the rifleman mech. None of them wanted to compete against the two mech designers. Just their background was alone to suppress them. Rather than offend mech designers who already earned at least a hundred times more than themselves, they would rather pick on someone their own size.

Ves found it funny that the three of them automatically dismissed Ves. They put all of their attention on each other, completely missing the fact that Ves stopped pretending that he was exhausted from lifting all of those parts.

As much as he wanted to sit back and let the remaining three mech designers decide who needed to go, their pathetic standoff kept dragging on. None of them had the guts to make a move!

Ves looked at the two women and the sole man before deciding on his target. He didn't want to catch any flack from Goza, so Ves began to approach the man.

The mech designer noticed Ves' approached and frowned. "Why are you coming here? Stay back!"

Ves ignored the man's blabbering as the other mech designers looked on from the sides.

"Hey! I don't like your approach! Can you please back off! You're already out of contention! No one will give you a mech!"

The distance between the two quickly shrank as Ves adopted a slightly faster pace. Although he didn't put on any airs, his confident demeanor already shook the other mech designer's courage.

"Stay back, you loser! Your specialty is garbage! You contributed the least to our restoration efforts!"

Even though the mewling mech designers stepped backwards, his back quickly bumped against the leg of the frontline mech.

With his target's retreat blocked, Ves sped up his pace into a brisk jog that quickly closed the remaining distance!

Once the other mech designer came within reach, Ves quickly overpowered the man's pathetic slaps and punched him in the gut!

Although he didn't put his full strength into it, the punch nevertheless caused the other mech designer to heave!

Ves had thought of multiple ways to incapacitate his target. He didn't want to give his opponent any opportunity to make a comeback, but neither did he want to leave any dangerous or permanent injuries.

For this reason, Ves ruled out knocking out the man by punching his head. If he wasn't careful, he could kill the Journeyman!

"I'll just have to immobilize you, then." Ves whispered as he pushed his opponent onto the ground.

The mech designer still hadn't recovered from the punch from earlier. Despite any enhancements that he might have received, none had augmented his body!

Ves faced no hindrance when he lifted up his leg and firmly stomped the mech designer's knee!

"AAAAHHH!"

The scream that escaped the victim's mouth rang throughout the entire chamber! Everyone else who initially felt dismissive about Ves had never expected that he would resort to such a brutish action!

Was he even a mech designer?!

Ves wasn't sure whether he broke the knee or not, so he stomped a few times more. Each stomp elicited another pained cry from the victim.

When he was sure he broke the limb, he did the same thing with the other knee in order to be certain. Who knew if the mech designer tried to support himself on one leg and tried to fight back! Plenty of mechs continued to fight back even when one of their legs no longer worked!

Sufficed to say, by the time Ves completely incapacitated the other mech designer, the victim turned into a broken mess. It became so bad that the floor underneath his body parted away, revealing a portal that swallowed up the injured man.

That was one mech designer out of contention!

Ves watched his victim disappear and turned back to the others with a gentle smile. "Sorry about that unpleasantness. That guy was in my way. In any case, I'll be claiming this frontline mech, if you don't mind. If you happen to object, I'm certain we can talk it out like civilized mech designers."

The two women who hadn't claimed a mech both shuddered. There was no way they were going to compete against this wolf in mech designer's clothing!

The two of them were the only mech designers left who hadn't claimed a mech. Three lithic mechs had already been claimed, leaving only the rifleman mech to themselves.

To everyone's surprise, the women didn't get into a catfight or anything. Having been cowed by Ves' brutal display, neither of them wanted to lower themselves to his level.

Instead, they calmly if tersely negotiated for ownership of the remaining mech. A lot of heavy concessions were being thrown around. While the opportunity to grow closer to the Rim Guardians was valuable, it was not an indispensable prize.

This was especially the case when both Tristan and Goz appear to be the most likely ones to win the trials! Rather than face near-certain defeat, one of the women looked much more amenable to cash out some of her winnings now rather than risk returning home without any gains.

In order to give the deal more weight, the women solicited both Tristan and Goz as witnesses to their verbal contract.

"Alright. It's agreed. You promise to give me all of these concessions in exchange for my withdrawal."

The two women shook hands and cordially parted. As soon as they concluded their deal, the woman who accepted the concessions fell into a portal that formed underneath her feet.

Only four of them remained.

Suddenly, the entire floor started to shake and rumble! Everyone tried to balance themselves as their footing became unstable!

"Look at the walls! The torches are getting lower!"

"The floor is rising! We're moving up!"

The floor slowly rose from ground level. The ceiling slowly parted to make way for the rising floor.

Complete darkness greeted them above! No one had any idea what was in store in those unknown depths! Tristan, Goz, Ves and the remaining female mech designer all prepared themselves for whatever was to come.

The next trial would likely be their last one!