

### **Chapter 1271 Rooting For Mechs**

The floor rose slowly from the depths of the tower. It took so long in fact that everyone's apprehension had begun to fade.

"Considering the velocity of our rise and the estimated height of this dark tower, it will probably take half an hour for us to reach the top." Goz muttered.

"Let's tidy up the torches and make sure they don't go out. They're our only source of light."

The torches had previously been attached to the circular wall, but the rising floor scraped them off their holders.

Ves and the others went and picked up the torches and placed them closer around themselves and their mechs. The tense air between the four temporarily faded as they were no longer compelled to compete with each other for the moment.

Each of them quietly turned their attention to their own mechs. Whatever was in store for them at the top, they all suspected that their mechs would play a pivotal role. The more they improved their mechs, the higher their chances of passing the next and probably final trial!

"Well, let's see if I can get these cannons to work."

When Ves decided to make his move earlier, he deliberately chose the frontline mech. While its quality was probably the worst out of the four, Ves quite liked it for its simplicity.

The mech may be cheap, but that also made it simpler and easier to restore. The mech possessed fewer points of failure for him to worry about, and most malfunctions were easier to fix.

"In the salvage business, a high maintenance mech is ten times worse than a low maintenance mech."

A more complex mech took a lot more time, effort and money to restore when broken. While the differences between the four lithic mechs weren't all that large, the frontline mech was by far the least complex mech.

With just an estimated half hour of time before the rising floor reached the top, Ves did not have much time to effect much repairs, though.

He spent most of his time trying to get the laser cannons to work. The mech he claimed was nothing more than an ornament if he couldn't restore its primary weapons!

Fortunately, the Rim Guardians hadn't made things too difficult. As Ves crawled over his mech, he found that everything went a little bit better than expected. In reality,

They would have never been able to restore these lithic mechs so easily!

"This is all a test." Ves reminded himself.

The Rim Guardians mainly wanted to see how they dealt with the new and unfamiliar. Dumping them onto a simulated forest environment and forcing them to work with mechs based off a very different tech base served to demonstrate their versatility in different situations.

The second trial was particularly deep due to the social aspect of it. The Rim Guardians probably wanted to see who could assert themselves or managed to convince their rivals to back out of the trials.

Ves probably went completely off-script here by resorting to more forceful persuasion than one would expect from a mech designer.

"Well, they didn't say anything about it, so I guess it's okay." He shrugged.

You could take a mech designer from the frontier, but you couldn't take the frontier from the mech designer! Ves still retained some of the values and principles he acquired from his time outside civilized space.

He was pretty certain that none of the other mech designers who entered the trials had ever experienced anything close as he did!

Although he acted completely outside of the behavior expected from a respected Journeyman, Ves didn't linger over his actions. While he was sure he could use his Devil Tongue to use to exorcist any mech designer in his sights, why bother with that when he could simply resort to something faster?

"I don't even like that name." He muttered.

He would rather be known as a brawling mech designer than a deceitful mech designer! How could he even deceive someone if they all put up their guard against his lies? It was a travesty!

Fortunately, none of the others weren't aware of his moniker as of yet. He could still play this card if the situation ever called for it, though Ves didn't think it would come to that point.

"Now that we built some mechs, they're probably going to be put to use."

Ves was quite interested to see these lithic mechs in action. Even though they looked like products of an ancient human civilization, they contained a lot of small inhuman touches.

Some of these alien elements were very thought provoking. Ves appreciated the opportunity to get in touch with such a strange mech. While he would never design such a strange mech on his own, he nonetheless felt as if he gained a stronger understanding of human-built mechs.

"The MTA has probably seen a lot. This shouldn't be the only attempt of aliens to replicate our mechs."

Humanity was by far the strongest power in the galaxy. Just its territorial expanse alone was mind boggling.

Although flawed and divided, the human race had become the standard to which all alien races needed to surpass in order to stay in contention.

The huge popularity of mechs in human space prompted many aliens to try their hand at developing and designing their own mechs.

Most mech designers who heard of such a thing expressed skepticism at the thought. How could these aliens ever come close to matching the splendor of humanity's mech community? The enormous mech industry and the vigorous mech market were too big!

The only major advantage the aliens enjoyed was that they didn't need to figure out everything themselves. Studying the lithic mechs abundantly made it clear to Ves that whatever race designed these mechs had learned from humanity's advancements!

"They haven't done any of the hard work."

Human mech designers and researchers put so much effort into their work. It was far too cheap of the aliens to plagiarize human innovation. While their lack of original research probably prevented them from surpassing human mechs, it wasn't too difficult to narrow the gap to a single mech generation or less.

Of course, Ves did not think their work mattered all that much. Every conflict between humans and aliens was mostly decided by warships. Even in the Age of Mechs, warships still formed humanity's sharpest weapons against external enemies.

"Right now, mechs aren't meaningful in any serious conflict between the races. Mechs are simply too small and weak to be of any consequence."

Just as infantry could never seriously contend against mechs, mechs could never seriously contend against warships. It was a waste of time for aliens to imitate human mechs. They were better off copying human warships instead!

He chuckled. "That's a lot harder to do, though. It's much easier to plagiarize mechs since they're so accessible."

No other warship ought to exist since the CFA claimed them all. As one of the most powerful human organizations in the galaxy, trying to copy their design schematics was incredibly hard!

Even if they did manage to obtain an old blueprint or something, trying to reproduce these powerful ships was easier said than done! Not only did they consist of incredibly advanced technologies that were difficult to reproduce, they also required an abundance of rare and expensive materials to make them work!

Considering how difficult it was to imitate a modern human warship, Ves could see now why certain aliens decided to imitate mechs instead.

"Even the aliens are rooting for mechs being able to beat warships one day." Ves idly muttered.

He continued to fix up the lithic frontline mech as the floor came nearer to the top. Using his existing knowledge, he managed to get the laser cannons to work fairly quickly. That left him with a little bit of time to tweak the rest of the mech, though the lack of tools and thorough understanding of the mech made it difficult for him to make any significant progress.

In the end, the rising floor rose and rose until it finally reached the top. Ves and the other mech designers beheld the strange nighttime environment of this unknown planet.

At this moment, Lieutenant Ferct finally made a reappearance. Her body faded into view in their midst.

"Nine of you entered the trials. Four of you are left. The previous two trials were merely an attempt at winnowing away the unworthy. As far as I'm

concerned, all of you are decent enough to become our friends, but according to the rules, only two can pass the trials."

Every mech designer who made it this far stared at each other. Tristan and Goz seemed to be the favorites to pass, though Ves emerged as an unexpected dark horse. The only woman among them was the weakest of the three, but whether she could make it to the end or not depended on the nature of the following trial.

"You must be curious about what we have in store for you next." The mech lieutenant teased with a grin. "We've already shown you a glimpse of what we can do with the technology at our disposal. My fellow Rim Guardians and I have entered into a long discussion on which trial should come next. Originally, we intended to give you all more time to tweak your mechs and assign random mech pilots to them in order to duke it out with each other, but where is the fun in that?"

Ves frowned for a brief moment. That would have been the most logical test considering their current situation. Why had they worked so hard on these lithic mechs if not to put them into use?

"These mechs that you've restored might look exotic in your eyes, but to us they are no better than toys." The lieutenant contemptuously snarked. "We Rim Guardians may have emerged from the galactic rim, but we are all trained to pilot high-performing first-class mechs. None of us look forward to piloting these primitive machines. To that end, we decided to mix up your last trial!"

Uh oh. Ves knew that tone of hers. It was the kind of tone someone used when they wanted to spring someone with a nasty surprise!

"In our inestimate wisdom, we Rim Guardians have decided to give you the opportunity to win the trials through your own efforts! We'll let you pilot these mechs into battle yourselves!"

WHAT?!

"We're not mech pilots! How can we possibly pilot these mechs?!"

"Doesn't matter!" Ferct grinned. "These mechs aren't real in the first place. They're physical projections. Reality here can be whatever we want in the Pit! You're saying you aren't mech pilots? Well, we can make that happen here! Our tech is more than capable of giving you a taste of what it is like to pilot a mech! It's a pretty realistic simulation!"

There were virtual games out there that gave norms a taste of what it was like to pilot a mech. The experience was heavily dumbed down, though, and the simulation was far from realistic. A normal human mind simply couldn't endure the strain of a genuine man-machine connection.

However, Ves didn't think the Rim Guardians would employ such fake means! With all of the tech they demonstrated so far, Ves did not believe they lacked a means of giving mech designers like him a somewhat realistic approximation of what it was like to pilot an actual mech!

"Well, let's proceed with the show. We'll be giving each of you an hour to enter the cockpit and familiarize yourself with the operation. I hope you won't embarrass yourselves by the time we put you into the ring! Good luck!"

The lieutenant disappeared, leaving every mech designer stumped.

"Maybe it's just a highly-advanced game interface." Tristan remarked.

Whatever the case, they would soon find out. Ves approached his frontline mech and slowly climbed up into its cockpit. After making himself comfortable on the hard stone seat, Ves lifted his finger, but hesitated.

Was it really possible for him to pilot a mech?

"Why do I feel so apprehensive?"

## Chapter 1272 Role Reversed

The top of the tower morphed into a very different environment after Lieutenant Ferct made her announcement.

The dark tower seemed to magnify in size until its circumference became as large as an extensive practice ground!

The casual manipulation of reality further hit home the fact that everything was under the control of the Rim Guardians. They could turn gravity upside down, they make the dead come to life and they could force Ves to live in a completely simulated galaxy for the rest of his life!

Ves did not feel comfortable about his lack of control over the environment. He could deal with an unfamiliar environment as long as it conformed to logic, but now that the laws of reality had become the playthings of the Rim Guardians, Ves could no longer count on even the most basic assumptions!

"It's like living in a reality with a very meddling god above my head!"

How could he ever live a normal and peaceful life if some nameless, all-powerful entity kept jerking him around? He would rather kill himself than to suffer the whims of such a tyrannical being!

Therefore, even if a tiny part of him looked forward to see how well the Rim Guardians simulated the experience of piloting a mech, he mostly dreaded what he would find.

"Is it really possible for me to pilot a mech?"

Making mechs more accessible to norms had always been a dream to many people. Genetic aptitude limited a huge amount of the population from ever piloting a mech, which was a huge shame since there were probably many exceptional people among them who might excel in battle.

Yet was it really such a good thing to eliminate genetic aptitude as a requirement to pilot a mech?



Every prior implementation of allowing norms to pilot mechs ended in failure. Due to their mental and physical limitations, they couldn't interface with a mech as fully and extensively as a mech pilot.

Therefore, most attempts to make mechs more accessible focused around heavily limiting the amount of data that was being exchanged through the man-machine connection. Automation took over most of the low-level functions of a mech, leaving the 'mech pilot' in control over the higher-level operations.

In theory, the idea was sound. In practice, it was like directing a bot to fight in their stead!

The principal advantage of mechs was that they allowed mech pilots to embody them and control them like their own bodies. While this control wasn't perfect by any means, the man-machine connection was so deep and profound that every mech controlled by a fully-trained mech pilot consistently outperformed the same machine when controlled by an AI!

Trying to increase the accessibility of mechs by neutering the man-machine connection was the wrong way to go about it. The less control the mech pilot exerted, the more the performance of the bot depended on its programming and its AIs.

While AIs programmed to pilot mechs could be decent, they simply lacked the intuition and spontaneity of human minds.

"Of course, one of the biggest reasons against developing these dumbed-down mechs is that there's no way an expert pilot will emerge from piloting them in this manner."

How could anyone reach the extraordinary threshold when they were simply piloting a mech like a kid controlled a miniature toy mech?

There was no comparison between this control mode and the real thing!

While Ves played various simulation games in his youth, the experience always felt fake to him. The games available to norms like him were far from the experiences that potentates get to enjoy when they hopped into a simulator pod.

Everyone generally assumed that norms would never be able to pilot a mech in a serious fashion. This act was the exclusive privilege of those fortunate enough to possess the right genetic aptitude!

"But what if this isn't the case anymore? What if newer tech has emerged that has subverted this assumption?"

Ves refused to believe the upcoming trial was anything more than an unrealistic simulation. Lieutenant Ferct already expressed as much. Perhaps he was making a bigger deal out of this than needed.

Still, he couldn't get it out of his mind that the MTA might be capable of doing more. What if they already cracked the puzzle? Were they holding back the tech that allowed any average human being to pilot a mech as well as a potentate?

If that was true, then the MTA held a powerful card in their hands that could trigger a major shift in human space!

Even if norms weren't capable of reaching apotheosis, the flood of low-level mechs onto the battlefield would massively increase the amount of casualties as every side threw more bodies into the fray!

Most conflicts between human states exhibited a lot of restraint because manpower had always been the most limiting factor. With just a tiny amount of potentates and mech pilots available at any time, it was easy for states to run out of them if they fought too long!

Expending the readily-available reserves of mech pilots happened to be the primary reason why the Bright-Vesia War never dragged on for more than five

years or so at a time. Neither the Bright Republic nor the Vesia Kingdom could afford to weaken themselves further by losing more mech pilots.

"Yet all of this will change once a limitless amount of cannon fodder can replace the scarcity of potentates."

Such a massive change would also have major implications to mech designers like Ves. The mech market would definitely balloon, providing every mech designer a lot more opportunities to sell their mechs!

"The premium segment won't be affected, but the lower segments will become a lot more significant!"

For now though, the MTA wouldn't introduce such a pivotal shift concerning the future of mechs. Allowing everyone to pilot a mech would just intensify every war and lead to much greater slaughter. The MTA didn't want to revive the chaos and destruction that forever tarnished the latter days of the Age of Conquest!

"Enough hesitation. Let's see how well the Rim Guardians can simulate the actual experience."

Ves pressed the button and activated the mech. As its systems started booting up, his anticipation continued to build. Whatever means the MTA came up with to simulate mech piloting, it was doubtlessly completely different from the simulations he played when he was young!

As the mech started to issue various error reports in incomprehensible alien script, Ves hovered over the button that another mech designer already identified as the command to activate the neural interface.

Ves was afraid.

He was afraid of what he might encounter. Would the experience be so real and so fantastic that he would continue to yearn for it when it ended? Would he develop a lifelong urge to repeat the experience?

He shuddered in his piloting chair. A part of him became tempted to give up. To keep the simulation unknown. He couldn't become addicted to something he never experienced.

Yet.. that was the coward's way out. A streak of courage lifted him up. Why should he be so afraid? Did he exhibit so little self-control that he wouldn't be able to resist the temptation of piloting a mech?

Ves closed his eyes in a solemn fashion. "I'm a mech designer. I chose my path. No matter what I'll experience today, I will never forget my real identity."

He pressed the button. A few seconds passed as the alien interface began to display a whole slew of alien symbols.

After that, Ves felt as if someone abruptly slammed a pipe into his mind!

"It's starting!"

A gradual stream of data entered his mind, which automatically parsed it before sending back a response.

This exchange began small, but happened in an instant. Mere milliseconds went by before the exchange of data turned from a trickle into a stream!

More and more data began to be exchanged between his mind and whatever was at the other end!

Ves tried his best to maintain his composure. He knew he wasn't interfacing with a real lithic mech, but instead some kind of standalone neural interface that was ostensibly meant to give anyone in the trial ground an opportunity to experience what it was like to pilot a mech.

In essence, no matter how real the sensations felt, they ultimately fell short of the real thing!

"It's still very close, though!"

Ves was not a stranger to what it was like to interface with a mech. He rode in the minds of numerous mech pilots during his Mastery experiences. The one that stood out the most in this case was his third Mastery experience.

He spent a significant time in the mind of Eloise Pelican. During this period, she deployed from her carrier numerous times. Each time she started her shift, she began to interface with her mech.

What Ves was experiencing with his mind right now was almost exactly the same that Eloise experienced whenever she connected with her own mech!

"There are differences, though!"

The exchange of data should have continually ramped up. That didn't happen. At some point, when Ves felt as if he was close to reaching his limit, the stream of data no longer expanded. It maintained its current volume as it tried its best to connect Ves to the mech.

Now that the initial phases had passed, Ves began to experience another change. He began to feel as if he was in control of a second body.

The sensation was extremely weird to him. While he still maintained control of his own body, he felt as if he acquired a second body.

Ves experimentally tried to lift his arm.

Both his physical arm and the arm of the frontline mech began to lift.

He actually moved his mech!

"This.. this is too real!"

Ves was incredibly astonished. Although the simulated interfacing still fell short of what he experienced in the minds of real mech pilots, this was by far the most realistic approximation that he had ever stumbled across!

As long as the implementation took a couple of more steps forward, the gap between real and fake would shrink to the point where every norm could pilot a mech!

He began to experiment more and more with the operation of his mech. Due to his previous Mastery experiences, he already knew most of the knacks when it came to asserting basic control over a mech.

He just hadn't thought about using those tricks himself, so he was awfully clumsy at first. The lithic frontline mech he piloted tipped dangerously back and forth as Ves hadn't been able to balance the mech properly.

Outside his cockpit, the other three mech designers weren't faring any better. The light skirmisher claimed by Goz even tripped on its feet and crashed to the ground face first!

Obviously, the ultra-realistic piloting simulation was too much to bear to unpracticed mech designers! They had always been the ones to make the mechs. Never did they ever think they would be placed in a situation where they had to pilot the machines themselves outside of simplified games!

Ves loosely estimated that the current experience was about seventy to eighty percent similar to a real piloting attempt. While that didn't sound very impressive at first, even the best simulation games that Ves had played only reached ten to twenty percent similarity at best!

Aside from a number of simplified operations, Ves genuinely felt as if he interfaced with a real mech!

As he slowly began to rein in his apprehension and astonishment, Ves began to exert an increasing amount of control over his frontline mech. He quickly

mastered walking and was currently practising his aim, which wasn't very good.

Now he knew why mech pilots needed to be good at marksmanship with their bodies if they wanted to be great shots when they piloted their mechs. Their personal skills partially transferred over to their machines.

While it was possible for mech pilots to become good at mech marksmanship, they would have to develop their skills from scratch, which wasn't all that practical, especially since their proficiency was largely tied to their practice mech.

"In short, personal skills offer a valuable shortcut to mastering the same skills when piloting a mech!"

Unfortunately for Ves, his marksmanship left a lot to be desired. The two heavy laser cannons of his frontline mech often went wide whenever he tried to hit a specific point! Even a third-year mech cadet exhibited better aim than him in a mech!

### **Chapter 1273 Temptation of Mechs**

Mech designers weren't supposed to be mech pilots.

For many mech designers, it simply wasn't possible to pilot a mech due to their genetic aptitude. In the rare case a potentate decided to become a mech designer, their piloting skills were often far too poor to be of use on the battlefield.

It took too much time and dedication to become good in one profession. Most people in the mech community only possessed a talent in one or the other. Those who excelled in mech piloting would not possess the traits that helped them become a mech designer.

All in all, it was a matter of efficiency. Rather than train a mech pilot to minor in mech design or vica versa, it was better to dedicate their time to their best profession and see it as far as possible.

Only those who put their entire time to a single profession were the most likeliest to surpass the extraordinary threshold and beyond!

Ves knew this. Yet despite knowing better, the rush of piloting a mech threatened to overtake his passion!

At first, he hardly maintained control over his lithic frontline mech. The body did not belong to his own, and its movement and balancing patterns were too divergent from the human norm, thereby forcing him to learn from scratch.

Yet after he applied all the knacks and tricks as well as his own understanding of mechs to the problems, he slowly managed to assert finer control of the machine.

It was still a work in progress. No matter what he witnessed before, one did not simply overcome ten to fifteen years of dedicated training. Mech cadets spent a long time in training because there were endless nuances to piloting mechs!

"I shouldn't feel proud to manage to walk like a decrepit grandpa." He muttered.

Piloting a mech was like controlling a second body that was way too big and clumsy. Its force exertion and its motions were too off-kilter.

What particularly plagued Ves was the amount of conscious control he needed to exert in order to make a deliberate movement. When he raised his own arm, he didn't need to think about activating the right muscles to do so. His subconscious mind was more than capable of doing that in his stead.



It was different with a mech. His conscious mind was completely unfamiliar with the artificial musculature and the million other details of a mech. It could not exert the amount of intuitive control of the mech through the man-machine connection that mech cadets spent years to refine.

This was the key to piloting a mech in a natural manner. By offloading as many operations to their subconscious mind, the mech pilot would have enough conscious attention left to focus on the aspects that truly mattered.

A good mech pilot would not only have plenty of attention to spare, but also made use of it in the most efficient and effective manner.

For example, a rifleman mech pilot would leave the act of moving to their subconscious mind. Well-trained mech pilots were adeptly able to hook up their subconsciousness with the operating system of a mech and achieve an optimal level of data transmission and decision making.

This allowed the mech pilot to focus their full attention to their marksmanship, improving their judgement and their aim.

Ves fell awfully short on the aspect of unconscious control. He needed to split his attention to numerous tasks that other mech pilots regarded as child's play!

If not for the throttling, compression, automation and all the other means to prevent a norm from getting overwhelmed, Ves would have fried his brains by now!

"The Rim Guardians must be laughing at our pathetic attempts to control our mechs."

His other peers fared worse. All of their mechs tripped on their feet a few times and planted their faces against the floor. The simple act of balancing a mech so that its center of gravity did not sway too much was apparently beyond them at first!

Time slowly lessened these pathetic displays, but the lack of control was very much evident in every mech's movements.

"I doubt everyone is as clumsy as they appear to be right now." He muttered suspiciously as he observed the others through the sensors of his mech.

As a direct disciple to an esteemed Master, Tristan Wesseling ought to have undergone some Mastery sessions. While they were doubtlessly not as elaborate as the System, the mech designer from the Carnegie Group should have learned the same knacks and tricks that Ves employed to gain more control over his machine.

"Any of us may be hiding our true level of skill."

Even Ves defaulted back to his habit of presenting a false facade to his potential adversaries. Knowledge was power. There was no need to give it out for free to his competitors.

He deliberately acted as if he had a lot of difficulty in piloting his frontline mech.

In truth, he was confident enough in his level of control to be able to fare decently in a fight against his peers.

"Even an awful mech pilot can defeat me in my current state, but I'm not facing off against mech pilots."

He was doubtlessly going to put into a duel against one of the three other mech designers. As knowledgeable as they were when it came to designing a mech, they were mere babes when it came to piloting them in a serious simulation.

Ves possessed another advantage. He chose to adopt a frontline mech, which ought to have been the weakest and least versatile among the four restored lithic mechs.

Ordinarily, its simplicity and lower parameters should have been a disadvantage. If the four lithic mechs had been piloted by trained mech pilots such as the Rim Guardians, then the limits to their performance would quickly tell.

Not so in this case. Everyone was so new and unfamiliar with piloting mechs that no one came close to brushing up against the performance limitations of their machines!

In fact, the lower limit, the easier it was to assert meaningful control!

"More powerful mechs aren't necessarily better if the mech pilot can't keep up. It's as if a normal mech pilot is attempting to pilot an expert mech. Even if it is theoretically possible, it's disastrous in every single case!"

Frontline mechs were foremost designed to be simple, expendable war machines. They were meant to be piloted by awful mech pilots who rushed their training or whose genetic aptitudes made them unfit for normal mechs.

For this reason, Ves felt decently confident about his level of control over his mech. A frontline mech was designed to be combat effective even if its mech pilot was a complete idiot!

The quick progress he made loosened his discomfort towards piloting a mech. So much so that its attraction continually grew!

"No wonder so many mech pilots loved their profession! Controlling a mech is exhilarating as long as it isn't too burdensome!"

The more Ves increased his coordination with his mech, the more he felt as if he embodied the mech. This gave him the illusion that his body was truly as tall and strong as that of a mech!

Human bodies seemed so weak in comparison!

The exhilaration of experiencing the same raw emotions as a mech pilot threatened to chip away at his determination. It was so seductive to repeat this experience!

"No! I'm not a mech pilot! I swore off from that ever since I decided to become a mech designer!"

He reasserted himself and ignored the addictive pleasure of piloting a powerful war machine, or at least the simulation of it. No matter how far the MTA had progressed in enabling norms to pilot mechs, it should not be more than a passing research opportunity. He should not give in to the temptation of pursuing anything more!

To Ves, withstanding this temptation was just like the Skull Architect's tests. As long as he held on to his conviction, he could come away with several gains.

"Now that I think about it, all of the trials so far each come with their own gains."

The first trial prompted mech designers to resort to their ingenuity when faced with the unknown.

The second trial exposed those who passed to an alien approach to mechs.

The third trial gave the four remaining competitors an unprecedentedly accurate experience of what it was like to pilot a mech!

Even if Ves or the others failed to win the final trial, they would still be content with the gains they made so far!

Each of them already learned lots of nuances even if they themselves weren't very proficient at executing them. It was similar but slightly different from a conventional Mastery experience, but was all the more valuable for this reason.

Some lessons only truly hit home if learned directly!

[Alright, you pathetic mech designers!] Lieutenant Ferct's voice came over the comm of his lithic mech. [As much as it amuses us to see you fumble around like two-year old children, it gets old rather quickly. You've got five minutes to prepare yourselves for battle! We'll hold a round-robin contest that allows each of you to face off against each other! The two with the most wins or the best performance will pass this trial!]

Ves immediately pulled back from his fascination and grew serious. After nearly an hour of practice, he couldn't claim to have gone anywhere close to mastering the basics, but at least he was good enough not to trip his mech when walking.

"Moving is not the problem, I think. It's my marksmanship that is the key."

A frontline mech was suitable when employed in great numbers in large battles, but fared less well in a dueling environment.

The lack of human limbs meant that Ves would lose as long as any melee mech came into knife fighting range!

With only a pair of laser cannons as his armament, he needed to hit and inflict enough damage to his opponents before they closed the distance!

Each lithic mech could survive a number of blows. If Ves wanted to take out the opposition, then he needed to strike the same section of a mech repeatedly in order to pierce through their exterior layers!

"This isn't too much of a challenge to trained mech pilots, but it's a different story when it comes to me! My accuracy is abysmal, especially against moving targets!"

There was no time for him to refine his control any further. With just an hour of practice, the upcoming mech duel would be unlike anything he had ever

witnessed before. Not even fresh cadets would pilot their mechs as bad as the four mech designers abruptly thrust into the cockpits of their lithic mechs!

When five minutes were up, the humongous tower surface split in half. A transparent wall separated the two sections. Two pairs of mechs were forcibly moved to each half.

Ves stared at the mech opposite to his own. It was the rifleman mech piloted by the only woman that remained. Although he never bothered to learn her name, that she made it this far was worthy of respect.

A fair distance separated the two mechs. It would take a minute or more for Ves to close the distance to his opponent!

[First duel, start!] Lieutenant Ferct announced.

Knowing her limits, the female mech designer didn't even bother to move from her place. Moving meant splitting her valuable attention and risking a fall. With the degree of control she had over her mech, she wouldn't be able to move faster than a slow walk anyway, so why bother!

"She made the right choice." Ves muttered as he witnessed the rifleman mech shakily raise its lithic laser rifle and began to take careful aim at his frontline mech.

A sizzle cracked through the air as a bright red beam went wide. The second shot came closer to hitting the frontline mech, but the third shot skewed even harder to the side.

It was not that easy to make a mech hit something when the mech pilot in question was completely unskilled!

Ves smirked. "It's my turn."

His frontline mech didn't bother moving either. He knew better than to bite off more than he could chew. He took his time to aim one of the laser cannon barrels before releasing a powerful beam!

The beam glanced against the rifleman mech's leg, inflicting moderate damage to the lithic armor plating!

"Yes!"

### Chapter 1274 His Calling

Ves belatedly understood that this was his first real mech battle. Although it was just an elaborate simulation, the duel was so lifelike that Ves actually felt it was real!

The slugging match that ensued between his frontline mech and his opponent's rifleman mech could only proceed in a single way. Both of the machines stood in place and traded potshots with each other.

The duel turned into a battle of attrition from the start! The mech that ran out of energy or sustained too much damage first would lose!

In a normal setting where both mechs were under the control of trained mech pilots, the rifleman mech possessed a much greater advantage. The mech possessed a considerable advantage in mobility and could easily close in and circle around the inflexible frontline mech, never presenting a fixed target for the cheaper mech to land a solid hit!

While the frontline mech possessed the edge in firepower and durability, its extreme lack of flexibility meant that even a weak rifleman mech could best it by wrestling it down in melee range!

Yet all of that did not come to pass right now. Neither mech designers were confident about their ability to move and fire their weapons at the same time, so they both opted to stand still!

In such a circumstance, the frontline mech fared better against the rifleman mech because the former did not rely so much on mobility!

Perhaps the female mech designer hoped that her marksmanship with her mech was better than that of Ves with his own machine.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not so feeble."

Ves concentrated on firing one laser cannon at a time, thereby maximizing whatever accuracy he could muster. He calmly alternated his fire, allowing the laser cannons adequate time to accumulate a new charge and shunt away the heat.

Laser beams occasionally marred the frontline mech's exterior, but its frontal armor held like a champ. It might be a different story if his opponent struck the rear armor, but she didn't have the confidence to move her mech during a fight!

For this reason, the battle turned into a slow death for the rifleman mech as it continued to accumulate more damage. Ves was just as poor if not poorer with his aim as the female mech designer, but his laser cannons packed a greater punch than the rifle wielded by his opponent.

Even though the laser rifle possessed a faster firing rate, Ves' frontline mech possessed two laser cannons. Even if they required a longer time to cycle another charge, Ves could just alternate between the two of them to keep up with the firing rate of his opponent!

The outcome was becoming increasingly more certain. If the woman piloting the other mech did not switch things up, her defeat would become assured!

"She's moving!"

Ves expected her to resort to this option. There was no point entering into a static exchange of fire against a mech that excelled in this mode of battle. The



only way the female mech designer could turn the tide was to take some risks! The only gambit available to her was to take advantage of her mech's mobility!

"It's a decent attempt, but your control is too awful!"

A rifleman mech could run quite fast when it got going. None of that happened in this duel. The rifleman mech ran as anemically as a shambling wreck. To Ves, trying to compensate for the movement took very little effort.

[Alright, it's about time your pathetic duel has ended. Victory goes to Ves Larkinson!]

Apparently, the duel between Tristan and Goz had finished a while ago. Melee mechs did tend to be more lethal than a battle of attrition between two laser-armed mechs.

As soon as Ves secured his first victory, the mech he piloted instantly refreshed itself. All of its energy cells were replenished and all of the battle damage disappeared.

"That's convenient."

A couple of more movements occurred as the Rim Guardians forcibly manipulated the physically projected reality in the Pit.

[Next duel, start!]

Ves came face-to-face with a lithic light skirmisher armed with a single knife. His second opponent was the Hexer, Goz Zoza!

"Let's see if you've been holding back."

He had always grown a bit suspicious about Zoza. They were similar in some ways, and that meant the facade they adopted did not necessarily represent their true ability.

Gozen indeed managed to surprise Ves once the duel had started! He piloted his mech forward at a clipped walk, which was a lot faster than Ves initially expected!

"So you did hold back, Zoza! There's no way you can exert this degree of control if you haven't underwent any Mastery sessions!"

This basically meant that the disparity between Ves and Goza was much less than the disparity between Ves and his previous opponent.

Both of them were piloting different mech types that changed the dynamic as well. Ves possessed an absolute advantage from the start, but it was on a time limit! As long as Goza's skirmisher reached melee range, it was game over for Ves!

"I can't let Zoza's mech get close! I have to finish it off before that happens!"

The only problem was that the light skirmisher moved faster than other mechs. Even if Zoza's control was lacking, the natural advantage of his mech shone through. The skirmisher mech could close the distance within forty seconds, which was not enough time for his frontline mech to fell the deadly mech!

"I need to find a way to delay the interception!"

Just like his previous opponent, Ves decided to take a risk, finding it preferable to surrendering to his inevitable doom.

His frontline mech steadily walked backwards. Although it didn't move very fast, it made it a little harder for the light skirmisher to enter into knife-fighting range.

Ves bought precious time with each step his frontline mech moved back! Although he had to devote a significant amount of attention to the maneuvering, his concentration happened to be one of his strong points!

He devoted half of his concentration to moving his mech backwards while he spent the other half trying to aim and fire at the slowly-approaching light skirmisher.

Zoza's mech suffered numerous heavy hits! Due to the firepower of the laser cannons, the light mech really couldn't afford to get hit again in the same place!

"He's adjusting!"

The light skirmisher couldn't afford to walk in a straight line. That would just make it trivially easy for Ves to hit the mech. By introducing some lateral movement, Zoza made it twice as difficult for Ves to land an accurate hit!

Yet such an adjustment also increased the burden Zoza himself! He had to devote so much attention to moving the legs of his mech that he was one step away from teetering over!

Despite the difficulty of these maneuvers, the light skirmisher never lost its balance!

"It's a good effort, Goz, but not enough!"

Ves did not panic as the light skirmisher slowly closed the distance while juking left and right. The speed employed by Zoza was far too slow to add much challenge to his aim.

Laser beams steadily struck the approaching mech. Although none of them hit in the same place, the damage continued to accumulate. More and more lithic armor plating vaporized or melted as they withstood an incredible amount of heat and energy.

Although Ves was pushing the limits of his concentration by walking and firing at the same time, he unconsciously felt more in tune with his mech as he did so. It was as if he had found his true calling!

The sensation that overcame him while he steadily tried to land the lethal blow onto Zoza's mech was difficult to describe. After so many years of witnessing other mech pilots make use of his carefully-designed mechs, it was a surreal experience for him to enter the cockpit himself!

His mind and body enjoyed the sensation of controlling a mech through the man-machine connection. So much so that Ves even had the illusion that he was made for this! Ves took to piloting a mech like a fish to water!

"Damnit, what am I daydreaming about?" Ves shook his head. "I have a duel to win!"

His frontline mech continued to step backwards while unleashing a steady cadence of heavy laser beams. Since Ves knew that his mech would be completely restored to its old condition at the end, he overloaded the laser cannons of his mech despite the risk he incurred.

Even if the conditions of the weapons rapidly degraded, the increase in firepower was more than worth it as each strike inflicted major damage to Zoza's mech!

Each time a laser beam struck, it not only vaporized the surface layers, but also transferred the remaining damage to the internals!

The light skirmisher began to stutter and slow down. Its internal damage was piling up, hampering the mech's mobility and stability.

The situation became increasingly more dire for Goz as his mech came closer to striking the frontline mech.

The shorter the distance, the larger the target!

The laser beams struck the light skirmisher more often, and even hit a couple of spots that had already been damaged!

First, the light skirmisher lost its arm.

Next, the mech lost half of its speed.

Then, the mech lost the bulk of its energy cells.

Finally, Ves managed to shear off its leg, causing the skirmisher to lose its balance and fall!

The outcome was no longer in question anymore. A few more hits later, and the light skirmisher had completely lost its remaining functionality!

[Ves Larkinson has won his second duel!]

Both mechs instantly restored to normal. Goz and Ves waited for the duel between Tristan and the female mech designer to end.

It took a while before the announcement came.

[Tristan Wesseling has thrashed his second opponent! With that done, the final duels will commence! Keep giving us more laughs, please!]

The dueling ground shifted again in order to bring Ves face-to-face with the knight mech piloted by Tristan.

To call it a knight mech was a bit dubious. When the mech designers restored the lithic mechs, they hadn't found any armaments for the mech, so Tristan decided to pair it with a makeshift club as its weapon and a shield that consisted of partially-fused scrap.

Even so, the mech he piloted was heavier and sturdier than anything that Ves faced before.

[Start!]

Once the duel commenced, the knight mech immediately placed its improvised shield forward and steadily marched forward.

While its advance wasn't as fast as that of the light skirmisher, its steady and solid footsteps was like that of a juggernaut, unstoppable and inevitable!

Ves quietly cursed. Facing off against a knight mech was the worst possible opponent for his frontline mech. A knight mech was designed to absorb damage, and most of them excelled at withstanding a steady barrage of energy fire.

He adopted the same strategy as before. His mech steadily moved backwards while firing its laser cannons at the approaching mech at a steady rhythm.

Ves found it easier to hit his opponent. The knight mech moved slower. It didn't exhibit enough speed to juke or dodge. It also presented a bigger target.

All of these disadvantages were significant, but the knight mech more than made up for it with its stellar durability!

"It's taking way too long to wear away the shield!"

Tristan spent a lot of time on forming the shield. He fused so many pieces of trash together that by the time Ves managed to destroy it, the knight mech had already reached halfway!

The armor of the knight mech was even more resilient than its shield! The only way Ves could win this duel was if he managed to land repeated hits onto one of the knight mech's legs!

Ves tried his best to tighten his aim, yet despite the effort he put into it, he was still too unpracticed. His precision and accuracy left much to be desired and way too many laser beams went wide or struck the thick chest plating of the opposing mech.

The end came slowly but certainly as the knight mech gradually closed the distance and whacked the frontline mech to the ground with a couple of blows!

[Tristan Wesseling wins again! Alright, that's it for this trial! Let's wrap it all up!]

Everything disappeared as soon as the final duels had ended. The cockpit and the rest of the mech faded away as if it never existed. The other mechs disappeared as well now that they served their purpose.

All four mech designers gathered together at once and stood in front of Lieutenant Ferct.

"As much as it amuses us to see you mech designers fumbling around like children inside your cockpits, we don't have all day!"

The end of the trials was at hand!

### **Chapter 1275 Fishy Arrangemen**

Lieutenant Ferct stared at each of them before announcing the winners of the final trials.

"Each of you showed your strength. However, only two of you are worthy enough to proceed. Tristan Wesseling, you've won all three of your duels. Your performance was very steady. I hope your design work will be just as steady."

"I will try my best to meet your expectations, lieutenant."

The woman then turned to Ves.

"Ves Larkinson, you've won two of your duels, which places you further ahead than the other two. You've passed as well."

"Thank you, lieutenant."

Tristan went undefeated, which meant he defeated Goz. Ves won against Goz as well, so the Hexer had already lost two out of three duels in this round-robin format.

Considering what Ves knew of the only woman among them, her rifleman mech shouldn't have been able to win against the others! Her lithic mech was

too weak and unsuited to the circumstances to fare well against the other machines!

Lieutenant Ferct offered some cheap praise to the pair of losers. Goz Zoza did not look pleased at himself, but Ves and Tristan defeated him fair and square. He could only blame his own bad luck for claiming a light skirmisher at the end of the second trial.

As the lieutenant took the time to console the mech designers who failed to secure enough victories, Ves processed his lingering yearning to reenter the cockpit.

It was so exhilarating to pilot a mech! Even though Ves firmly reminded himself that he was first and foremost a mech designer, the allure of piloting a mech continually teased his desires.

It took a bit more effort than he liked to stamp out this temptation!

As much as Ves desired to continue to pilot a mech, he had already made his choice. He already enjoyed far more success in his design career than he could ever hope for. Why squander his gains and his promising future for becoming something he simply wasn't meant to be?

It was fine to envy a mech pilot. Yet his hidden desire must not develop anything more than a passing fancy!

The two losers disappeared after Lieutenant Ferct finished talking to them. The Rim Guardian turned her head to both Tristan and Ves.

"As for the two of you, both of you have shown enough capabilities to associate with us. We've just updated your records to reflect that. I must say, I'm not surprised that Mr. Wesseling has been able to pass, but you, Mr. Larkinson, are a lot more versatile than we thought. Other than your muddled performance during the first trial, you've continually exceeded our expectations."



"I've been through some challenging times." Ves smiled. "Also, I come from a military family. How can I not know what it is like to pilot a mech?"

The lieutenant shook her head. "Whatever. Come with me. I'll explain what it means to be our associate."

A portal formed underneath the three and brought them away to a comfortable lounge. Ves, Tristan and Ferct each sat down after accepting a glass of liquor from a waiting bot.

"Tristan, I think you have a good idea what it means to become our associate, correct?"

The Fridayman nodded. "It means I've become qualified to treat with the Rim Guardians. It doesn't mean I've become a part of your fraternity or enjoy your protection."

"Neither of you have become internal members of the MTA. You'll have to pass completely different trials in order to be eligible. In the beginning, what the two of you earned is merely an opportunity to be heard by us. This essentially means that as long as we require something from an external mech designer, we might ask you to perform a task. It also means that if you've found something interesting or came up with a very valuable transaction, we'll consider your offers seriously."

Ves frowned a bit. He still didn't quite understand what he was getting into. "There must be more than that, right?"

"Correct." Ferct nodded while she took a sip of his drink. "You are only our most peripheral associates for now. If you want to enjoy more benefits from our fraternity, then you will need to work for it. Both of you will have to be proactive and come up with something interesting, valuable or worthwhile enough for us to invest in our relationship with you. If you think you're already in the bank, then you are sadly mistaken."

The Rim Guardians may not be particularly dominant within the MTA, but they were still behemoths on a galactic scale!

The fraternity sought closer relationships with many mech designers throughout the galactic rim, but not too much. In their perspective, it was better to develop closer relations with one good mech designer than a thousand mediocre mech designers.

Considering the immense disparity between the Rim Guardians and the local mech designers from a star sector, the former didn't have to do any of the work in developing the right relations. They counted on the mech designers to be proactive and prove themselves worthy of friendship!

"Look, lieutenant, I've been dumped in the Pit without any explanation. Can you finally tell me what's so great about becoming your associate and why you want to treat with us locals?"

Lieutenant Ferct smiled in an intrigued manner. "I suppose you do deserve an explanation. Let's start from our perspective. There are two additional reasons why the Rim Guardians wish to develop a network of local mech designers. First, let's just say that we want to expand our options. We don't always wish to do business with the MTA's internal mech designers. They've formed their own cliques whose interests don't entirely match ours."

"Does that mean there aren't any mech designers among your fraternity?" Ves curiously asked.

"Some, but not all of them can be trusted with sensitive business. Sometimes, it is better for us if we rely on an associate that isn't closely connected to the MTA, like you two. Naturally, we don't expect too much from locals. We won't hold you to the same standards as those who come from our own ranks."

"What is the second reason?"

"Insurance." Ferct replied seriously. "The MTA is a rock-solid organization and is at the height of its power. Yet who knows whether the current galactic order will shake one day. While human space is very steady for now, we can't guarantee that everything will remain as secure a hundred or a thousand years from now. The seeds we sow today might bloom into a bountiful harvest for us when we most need it in the future."

"Ah. I understand."

The Rim Guardians were the underdogs of the MTA. They faced a herculean task of fighting against the bias against the galactic rim within the Association. Too many leaders and too many highborn members supported the Prime Humans, who wanted to do away with the galactic rim entirely!

If the Prime Humans ever had their way, the Rim Guardians would become completely unmoored from their mother organization. If such a catastrophe ever happened, the ex-MTA members would certainly have to seek refuge from the locals of the star sectors they inhabited.

Forming strong and steady relations with strong, influential and reliable local mech designers at such a time would give the Rim Guardians solid retreat options.

"As for what is in it for mech designers who earnestly seek our favor, I think you already know some of the answers. We can offer some exclusive goods and services to you that's normally only available to internal members of the MTA. It is one of the only ways for many mech designers to obtain extremely rare and restricted exotics. They come at a very high cost, mind you, so it's not often that someone will make this demand."

"Then what do they request instead?"

"To access our distribution network, mostly. We don't mind facilitating trade as long as your goods are valuable enough to be transported across star sectors."

We also act as guarantors for any contracts you sign with companies that are distant from you. It's not easy to enforce a contract when the other party is fifteen star sectors away. Once you hear of their betrayal, the other party would have been long gone by the time your response has come through."

Ves looked a bit skeptical. "And the Rim Guardians are willing to intercede once someone breached a contract?"

"Oh yes, but only for the major ones that are worth our attention. It helps if the contract in question involves us as well. No one will dare pervert the contract as long as our name is included."

He knew how valuable this service could be. Every mech designer with ambitions to expand beyond their native star sector would have to set up a presence in other star sectors.

Whether they set up their own subsidiaries there from scratch or joined hands with local partners, the distance between the two was too far. While communication was instant, trying to convey a material response took months or years!

This was far too much of a delay for many mech companies to stomach! If they could not effectively assert control beyond their own star sector, then they were better off with tempering their ambitions!

Therefore, the willingness of the Rim Guardians to serve as guarantors and enforcers of contracts was all the more valuable. It allowed Ves to get away with expanding his business to neighboring star sectors without yet accumulating the necessary clout to do so while keeping distant operations compliant.

Ves still believed that what the mech lieutenant had mentioned so far wasn't entirely complete. He suspected that the Rim Guardians definitely sought out more from local mech designers.

Yet Ves did not have the opportunity to ask for clarification as Lieutenant Ferct moved on to some procedural matters.

She explained how their records had been updated and what they should and shouldn't do with their new status.

"Right now, the two of you have only managed to get a single foot in the door. If you truly want to take another step further, then we expect you to prove yourselves just as you've done in the trials."

The lieutenant assigned two different missions to Ves and Tristan.

"Mr. Larkinson, your family is notable for birthing expert pilots and expert candidates with each generation. One of your works has also acquired a reputation for facilitating the rise of an expert candidate."

Ves reluctantly nodded. "That is true."

"Well, I have a favor that needs fulfilling. An important associate of ours has entered into some difficulties and entrusted his heir to us. The young man in question is a mech pilot who has been trying very hard to advance to expert candidate. We've put him through numerous training programs, but we have seen no hint that he has improved."

"Is this mech pilot an internal member?"

"No. Just the son of a valued friend of ours." Ferct shook her head.

"Regardless, with each failed attempt, he's becoming more and more desperate. For his own sake, I believe it's best for him to experience a change in scenery. I'd like him to accompany you for a few years and see if your Larkinson methods are better."

This request frankly stunned Ves a bit. The MTA was one of the most knowledgeable organizations when it came to mech pilots. How could Ferct think of passing over this scion to Ves of all people?

There must be a lot more behind this request that Ferct hadn't mentioned. Ves was very leery about entering into another pit. He already fell into one. He didn't want to make the same mistake!

"Lieutenant Ferct, I'm very honored that you think highly of the track record of the Larkinsons, but our methods aren't as extensive as you think. Our basic formula for pumping out expert pilots is to train our Larkinsons well and throw them into a war that breaks out every generation."

"Ah, yes. About that, Mr. Larkinson. The scion I wish to leave to your hands is not exactly the most courageous mech pilot. He deeply despises battle. Therefore, I hope your family has other means to draw out his potential. Just try it for a few years."

Ves widened his eyes in astonishment. Did the lieutenant know how impossible it was for a craven mech pilot to advance? How could such a coward ever hope to become an expert pilot?

"Impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible, Mr. Larkinson. We just have to find the right solution."

The lieutenant didn't accept no for an answer. No matter how much Ves wanted to avoid this responsibility, Ferct seemed uncommonly eager to offload this cowardly mech pilot into his hands!

There was definitely something fishy about this entire arrangement!

#### **Chapter 1276 A Reaction**

While Ves felt enormously put off by his new task, the Rim Guardians didn't take no for an answer. Lieutenant Ferct cared nothing for his objections and was blind to his reluctance.

Her attitude reflected the typical stance of the MTA. Locals not only ought to, but desired to fulfill their whims!

Ves felt enormously put out by this arrogant attitude. Even if the Rim Guardians possessed the strength to back up their assertiveness, they could have shown they actually cared.

At the end of the trials, the Rim Guardians at least gave him something extra before they kicked him out of the Pit. Lieutenant Ferct passed him a data chip before shoving him, Lucky and his previous purchase through a portal.

"A little welcome bonus for passing our trials! I hope you have fun with it! If you want more, I expect you to work for it! We're already sending the mech pilot in question to your ship docked in orbit!"

Ves emerged back onto the surface of Centerpoint V.

"Meow?"

"Yeah. I don't really know what happened either. It seems I've become associated with yet another club."

He decided to take a break and rest at a hotel for the night. His mood to explore the rest of the Centerpoint system had faded now that he had unknowingly entered an initiation session.

Although he resented that he had no choice, Ves did admit that it wasn't all that bad to build up a relationship with the Rim Guardians.

While Ves preferred to keep his distance from the MTA, the powerful organization might not like it. For now, he was just an insignificant Journeyman that was just entering the prime of his career.

Once he advanced to Senior and made strides towards Master, the MTA's interest in him would certainly multiply, especially if he improved rapidly.

If the MTA paid closer and closer attention to him, he would prefer to enjoy some support from within the organization.

This was especially important when Ves became more prominent in the future. With the way his design philosophy worked, he was already attracting a lot of attention with his recent designs.

If Ves continually proceeded to design mechs with X-Factors as strong as that of the Aurora Titan and Transcendent Messenger, then he would surely attract a huge amount of attention!

No matter how much Ves tried to deflect the MTA's attention, they obsessed over all things mechs and would never miss any novelty. His designs would definitely attract the attention of their internal mech designers who would begin to value his design philosophy even if it was unlikely to be realized at the Master-level.

"This is actually a fortuitous encounter." Ves muttered to himself while he idly stroked Lucky's back in his hotel room. "I just wished Charlotte could have told me about what was in store for me if I used her invitation card."

Ves could hardly explain why Charlotte chose to give him the invitation card without explanation. Did Charlotte genuinely think that she was helping him, or did she just decide to invest in him and expect a future payoff?

If it was the former, then she was a friend, if a misguided one at that. If it was the latter, then Ves needed to treat her in the same way he treated his other business partners such as the Tovars or Calabast.

"Well, what do I expect?" Ves shook his head. "As a probationary recruit, Charlotte would have certainly known the value of a mech designer who advanced before reaching thirty. If I were in her place, I would have invested in such a promising mech designer as well."

If Ves truly wanted to avoid attention, then he would have delayed his advancement by at least a decade. A Journeyman who advanced at their forties was incredibly unremarkable.



Although late bloomers existed who rose to greater splendor in the later stages of their lives, there were far too many muddleheaded mech designers who simply weren't diligent enough to reach those heights.

"It's too bad I can't afford to take it slow."

Ves received numerous hints and warnings from various different sources that larger developments were afoot.

War would definitely break out in the future, that was for certain. If Ves wanted to avoid being treated as a disposable mech designer like in the previous war, then he needed to make as many strides as possible.

"It's probably unrealistic to make it to Senior by the time the next big conflict breaks out. It takes too much time to do all the research that's required to develop my design philosophy." Ves shook his head in regret.

He would just aim to become a prominent Journeyman instead.

"It depends on how much time I have."

He already changed his status a bit by becoming a Journeyman, but that was not enough for him. The closer he got to Senior, the more regard he received from the Bright Republic and everyone else. The days of accompanying a task force that went on suicidal missions should be over.

"Let's see what this data chip is all about."

Ves refrained from accessing the data chip immediately. Now that he was alone with nobody else but a dozing Lucky, he finally felt secure enough to see what it contained.

He slotted in the data chip to his comm and began to explore its files.

"These are... lithic mech research reports?"

He already received a glimpse in the workings of lithic mechs. Obtaining these documents and reports provided him lots of data and analyses to make greater sense of them. It opened the door for him to design a lithic mech by himself.

"Still, who would want to buy a lithic mech?" Ves scratched his head.

The application of mechs based around stone materials rather than metallic materials was rather dubious. Perhaps the only instances that stone-based mechs would be useful was if someone ever needed to employ a mech in an environment that was extremely hostile to metal objects.

In every other case, people were better off using standard mechs. The study in the use of lithic materials in mechs was a very obscure research field. Other than mech designers who specialized in using stone-like materials as substitutes for alloys, no one else wanted to waste their time on developing a material that only three or four people would ever make use of in the entire galaxy.

Therefore, the value of the research files on the data chip was very much of limited value to Ves. Certainly, since he already received it, he might as well spend his time studying what he already got. He just wished that the Rim Guardians were more considerate.

"Research on lithic materials in mechs is pretty much trash for them. That's probably the reason why they gave it out so freely."

The Rim Guardians sent an unspoken message with this data chip. If Ves wanted to obtain papers on more valuable tech related to mechs, then he needed to work for it. The files he obtained was just an appetizer compared to all of the knowledge they held in store!

Ves certainly knew that the MTA held back a lot of exclusive tech, but unlike every other mech designer, he wasn't so desperate to beg them for access. Not when the System could take care of most of his needs in this area.

"I'm much better off trying to obtain their protection and to make use of their network to obtain rare exotics."

Hardly any organization could rival the MTA's reach in human space! They probably had access to nearly every exotic material discovered by humanity!

He was already thinking about seeing whether he could obtain some of the exotics needed to fulfill the System's Supply Missions.

"It would be nice if I can do that." He sighed. "But that would mean earning their favor first."

Ves dreaded what he would find once he returned to the Barracuda. The Rim Guardians already intimated to him that the mech pilot they wanted to turn into an extraordinary was a bit of a problem case.

While he hadn't met the mech pilot as of yet, it was clear the Rim Guardians already gave up on him! Why else pass him over to a random mech designer?

He had about three years to shape up this mech pilot into an expert candidate or expert pilot. Lieutenant Ferct mentioned that the latter was more preferable, but unrealistic. Achieving the former was already more than good enough.

"Still, how easy can it be to advance to expert when you don't have the guts to fight?"

The lieutenant plainly mentioned that the mech pilot was a coward. From what Ves knew about how mech pilots advanced into experts, they needed to develop a strong will or conviction!

How could a coward who easily gave up or retreated from a fight ever develop a strong and coherent force of will?

It was impossible!

"Well, I can take my time at least. Three years isn't long, but it isn't short either."

Ves doubted that he would receive any punishment from the Rim Guardians if he failed. If it was so easy to turn someone into an expert pilot, then the entire pilot roster of the MTA would have consisted of experts or higher by now!

If he was really desperate, he could resort to more unorthodox solutions.

Perhaps he could solicit a design spirit like Qilanxo's spiritual fragment to intervene once again.

Perhaps Ves could do the procedure directly with his own spiritual techniques. He knew the theory. He had seen it happen before. How hard would it be to replicate Qilanxo's feat?

Without experimenting with his techniques on some test subjects, Ves wouldn't dream of messing with the mind of an important mech pilot!

"Meow."

"You're right, Lucky. I should meet with the mech pilot first before I cast any judgement. Maybe he's not as bad as Lieutenant Ferct made him out to be."

"Meow."

"Yeah, I still have my other purchase."

Ves grabbed the floating box off his side and opened it up to reveal the grey meteorite. He touched its pitted surface a few times but sensed nothing remarkable.

Had he really felt a reaction from this exotic when he swept it with his spiritual senses back then or was it just an illusion?

He spent a few more minutes studying the rock with his hands and his spiritual vision.

To his fingers, it just felt like any piece of rock. His spiritual vision yielded nothing either. As far as his spiritual senses were concerned, it was completely devoid of spirituality!

"How can that be?"

He frowned at the rock, suspecting there was more to it than met the eye. How could it cause a small number of people to faint when they came in touch with it, yet remain completely inert when it fell into his hands?

Ves became more engrossed in his study. He wanted to crack the secret of the rock. He didn't even want to contemplate that he spent a lot of money on a useless rock that was no different from the ones he could pick up from the streets!

"Maybe the rock only reacts to something more substantial." He guessed.

Having grown a bit desperate to get a reaction out of the rock, Ves reluctantly employed his partially-recovered spiritual energy. He separated a tiny portion of it and moved it closer to the rock to see if it reacted in any way.

A change occurred!

As soon as the mote of spiritual energy came close, the rock suddenly sucked it in! Ves became astonished at how his spiritual energy had been hijacked!

Ves quickly suppressed his excitement. He was still on Centerpoint V, which meant that he shouldn't be acting like he was alone.

Still, a small smile crept up on his face. He no longer regretted his purchase! While he still needed to figure out the full properties and uses of this material, at least he could feel relieved he hadn't bought a useless rock!

## Chapter 1277 Matching Mech Designers

Ves tried to take back the tiny bit of spiritual energy he lost. It took some exertion, but he eventually managed to pull it away from the hungry rock.

Once he did so, Ves looked at the rock with a speculative expression. What was it? Why did it attract his spiritual energy? What uses did it have?

In any case, Ves already developed a theory of why this exotic initially attracted notice. It must have stored some spiritual energy upon discovery. When certain people came in touch with it, the rock must have discharged it into their bodies which caused them to faint.

He wondered what kind of energy the rock used to contain. Could it be a spiritual remnant of some long-dead alien or something? Whatever it contained, Ves found no traces of its existence.

What interested him more was if this exotic was unique. It would be a bummer if he devoted a lot of research to its potential applications, only to find no other samples to realize them. There were many exotics in the galaxy that did not occur more than once!

"I really hope this rock isn't among this category!"

At the very least, it should be easier for him to find a similar rock once he studied and recorded its parameters. Ves could scour all sorts of databases and marketplaces by matching the density, hardness and other properties of his rock to what other sellers had on offer. It would save him another field trip to a marketplace like the one he visited before.

"Mech designers only need to find a useful exotic once in person. We can leave the search for other samples to others."

Ves had some hopes of finding other samples of this grey exotic because it originated in the Komodo Star Sector. Although the seller refused to reveal

where it had been found, Ves was quite sure of this. The seller did not seem like a person who represented an inter-sector trading company!

He closed the box and set it aside. His curiosity had been assuaged by his discovery. He could find out more about the rock when he had access to better lab facilities.

As he prepared himself for bed, he idly wondered if he should still stick around in Centerpoint.

"This star system is far from simple. Who knows whether I'll get entangled into something else tomorrow."

Influential factions like the Rim Guardians ran rife in Centerpoint. The players here were far more powerful than anyone else in the Komodo Star Sector!

Ves shrugged as he laid down on his bed. "I only got in touch with the Rim Guardians by using their invitation card. If not for that, I would have been no different from a regular tourist."

"Meow."

Lucky crawled to the other side of the bed and curled up.

"Yeah. I planned to find a girlfriend here. I can't depart without making a serious attempt."

He sighed. To be honest, after coming out of his previous ordeal, he would rather go back to work. He didn't have the heart to find a suitable girlfriend.

"Besides, why should I find a girlfriend in Centerpoint? I can just as well find one in the Bright Republic instead." He muttered before he went to sleep.

The next day, Ves woke up and did his morning routine. Once he ate a sumptuous breakfast, he passed the box to the receptionists of the hotel he was staying at and instructed them to deliver it to the Barracuda.

After taking care of that errand, Ves turned his attention to girlfriend hunting.

He frowned as he sat down on a sofa in the hotel lobby. "How should I go about it, Lucky?"

His cat clung to his shoulder in a contented manner.

"Meow."

"Yeah, you're right. Someone of my stature shouldn't be so crass to rely on a hook-up app to find a match. I think there ought to be matchmaking services out there for lonely mech designers."

Many mech designers tended to be nerds who didn't know their way around someone of the opposite gender. They might be brilliant when it came to designing mechs, but they were completely inept when it came to picking up girls!

"Am I like that?" He doubted himself.

Ever since he embarked on his career, he devoted himself completely to his profession. He ignored all other distractions and pleasures in pursuit of becoming a better mech designer.

Obviously, all of that effort paid off. Even if he had the System, it didn't do all the work on his behalf. Now that he passed the first milestone by becoming a Journeyman, Ves could finally direct some attention to the other parts of his life that he neglected as of late.

"Meow."

"Yeah, you're right. A girl won't fall into my lap just because I'm available."

The Centerpoint System was completely unfamiliar to him. Ves decided against visiting random bars or clubs. Who knew what kind of people he would bump into. While Centerpoint V was mostly populated by space peasants, a considerable amount of protected galactic citizens lived here as well.



Instead, he activated his comm and searched the galactic net.

"Ah, so matchmaking services do exist! And there's even some that caters specifically to mech designers!"

Ves read up the information they put into their portals. Apparently, many mech designers sought to develop a relationship with other mech designers for several compelling reasons.

First, a mech designer understood another mech designer the best. If his girlfriend was a fellow mech designer, he could talk shop with her. They could bounce off ideas on each other and they could even discuss some of the particulars of their design philosophies to someone they trusted the most.

Second, a mech designer might live for a very long time. A Journeyman already lived a bit over two-hundred years if they worked hard to afford life-prolonging treatment.

While they could work a couple of decades more to earn the right to have their spouses undergo the same treatment, that was a lot of time and money spent on something that didn't directly progress their careers.

"Time and money are very valuable to mech designers." He muttered. "The less time and money spent on their research and their improvement, the less likely they can take the next step."

For this reason, mech designers mostly preferred to marry someone of the same rank. A Journeyman like Ves should start with finding a match among other Journeymen first.

Instances where Apprentices hooked up with Journeymen or Journeymen became lovers of Seniors were very rare. The distance between the two was too big. While pure love sometimes prevailed, most of the time the disparity in status and capability always got in the way.

A problem might still develop even if two Journeymen decided to marry. Once one of them advanced first, a gulf emerged between the two. Ves occasionally heard about divorces where more talented mech designers decided to ditch their slower partners and upgrade to better ones.

However, it was not too bad if the other Journeyman failed to advance to Senior as fast. A Senior possessed so much more earning potential that they could subsidize the research activities of a fellow Journeyman.

"Journeymen have already proven that they have the potential. The same can't be said for Apprentices. No matter how much money is invested in them, they might never break through."

Still, it was best if both mech designers were equally as talented.

To Ves, that meant that he should find a Journeyman who advanced before their thirties just like him. The problem was that not a lot of mech designers like that existed.

Aside from the previous two reasons, there was an additional reason as well why mech designers should seek a peer. It was by far the most relevant motivation to marry a fellow mech designer!

"Mech designers with compatible design philosophies can combine their forces and achieve greater synergy in their collaborative design projects!"

Ves recalled the time he was assigned to inspect the Kadar-Neyvis Group. The two lead designers shared a very close relationship with each other, but their specialties weren't compatible.

"Even then, Mrs. Kadar and Mr. Neyvis did not let that hinder them from growing their mech company. They also raised a wonderful family while they were at it. How much more could they have accomplished if their design philosophies synergized with each other?"

Although the KNG had now become a defunct and tarnished mech company, Ves still admired it when it was at its height. He was envious of the trusting relationship between Kadar and Neyvis. Ever since he witnessed their devotion to each other up close, a part of Ves yearned to enter into a similar relationship.

If Ves ever found a fellow mech designer whose design philosophy complimented perfectly with his own, then both stood to gain many benefits.

"Design philosophies don't necessarily have to work in isolation. Perhaps it's easier to express a design philosophy with the aid of another one."

This allowed their collaborate mech designs to achieve a higher level of performance than if they designed their mechs on their own. This was especially pertinent at the higher levels as diminishing returns ensured that every improvement came at an exorbitant price.

"Collaboration can negate some of this by achieving abrupt jumps in performance."

Not only would their existing works be better and possess higher values, but their future progression became easier as well. When a design philosophy interacted with other design philosophy, they provided their mech designers with several more research directions.

Ves wasn't quite sure whether he could find a partner with a design philosophy that synergized with his own rather than complimenting it. Two unrelated design philosophies would merely exist in the same mech design in isolation, which was not as ideal.

"I guess that's what these matchmaking services are for. They got to earn their keep somehow."

All of these variables complicated the lives of single mech designers enormously. This was where specialized matchmaking services came into

play. They took both their personal and professional traits into account when they matched customers with an appropriate partner.

By employing the most sophisticated matching AIs and the most empathic relationship experts, they guaranteed a reasonable degree of satisfaction whenever they matched a mech designer with a compatible peer.

Ves decided it didn't hurt to try and make use of one of these services.

Many different matchmaking services existed that catered to Journeyman and higher. Frankly, Ves couldn't find any differences. All of them boasted good reviews, because the bad ones always went out of business.

"All of these services have ties to the MTA as well."

Either their owners were internal members, or they established a business partnership with one. This allowed these matchmaking services to access some of the MTA's databases or make use of some of their more advanced AIs and algorithms.

This told Ves something very important. "Even the MTA is interested in facilitating relationships between mech designers."

This made sense. According to their own research, mech designers achieved more success if they were partnered with fellow mech designers.

While that didn't mean that Ves was forbidden from marrying a mech pilot or someone who wasn't from the mech community, he would be forgoing a huge advantage.

"Love should trump everything else." Ves muttered. "But if I can enjoy both love and a useful mech design partner, then that is even better!"

After careful study, he contacted a matchmaking service company with a great track record. Although they charged more than everyone else, it was still within the range of his budget.

After a quick exchange of messages, Ves made an appointment to stop by the company's branch on Centerpoint V later in the day.

[We have already pulled the relevant data from your record, Mr. Larkinson. Please be assured that our sophisticated matching system is searching for compatible mech designers right now. We await your arrival at our offices at the appointment time.]

Ves turned off his comm with a smile. "Let's go and hang out until my appointment comes, Lucky."

"Meow."

"Yeah yeah, very funny, Lucky. You're wrong. I'm not married to my work!"

#### **Chapter 1278 Sophisticated Matchmaking**

Ves was sipping a cool drink on a terrace in a downtown district.

Meanwhile, Lucky perched comfortably on the table. The cat leisurely ate the random minerals that Ves had bought from a nearby exotics marketplace.

"Meow."

"No, Lucky. We're not staying here so that you can have access to every exotic in the galaxy. They're too expensive!"

"Meow!"

"Don't even think about it! Just because I gave you a present back then doesn't mean you can get away with it in MTA territory!"

Lucky resentfully turned around and swung his butt at Ves.

There was no way Ves would let Lucky raid the highly-guarded exotic marketplaces. With the amount of sophisticated security precautions in place, the risks were way too high!

"If you want to grab something, at least do it in a place like Bentheim. Centerpoint is way too secure for you to pull off any of your tricks."

"Meow meow!"

"Pff! When did this conversation suddenly turn to my love life? Of course I'll find a girlfriend! The matchmaking services in Centerpoint are the best in the entire star sector!"

Ves had grounds to make this statement. Centerpoint was one of the most frequented star systems in the entire star sector. It was a holy land for mech design and attracted many mech designers looking to improve or exchange knowledge.

While he could still find a match in Bentheim or Leemar, the range was far less. The Bright Republic didn't host many Journeymen.

The Friday Coalition was a lot better in this regard, but most of them were split up on different planets and different coalition partners.

No single star system concentrated so many mech designers in a single location than Centerpoint!

While Ves did not have any precise figures on hand, it was not a big stretch to estimate that there were at least 10,000 Journeymen present somewhere in Centerpoint!

Of course, not all of them were single and available. All of them also possessed very different backgrounds. Due to the proximity and the high cost of living in Centerpoint, most Journeymen tended to come from the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony.

"Many of them probably disdain hooking up with a mech designer from a lesser state." Ves briefly frowned.

Still, some mech designers valued compatibility and other traits over someone's origins. Even mech designers employed directly by the MTA still married with local mech designers if their design philosophies worked well with each other.

"Everything is worth it as long as it helps your design philosophy!"

A good match increased the chance that a mech designer could achieve a breakthrough. For this reason alone, pompous internal mech designers of the MTA wouldn't hesitate to propose to a pauper from a third-rate state! The huge gulf in status between them was of very little concern in comparison!

Even if the matchmaking service failed to find a match within the star system, it could still expand its reach and match him with mech designers who resided elsewhere.

"It will just be a little bit more troublesome to meet with each other." He muttered.

Time passed as Ves and Lucky leisurely finished their drinks and snacks. As the time of the appointment neared, Ves hailed an aircar and rode it to the vicinity of the matchmaking agency.

Like any prestigious company, the office was situated in an upscale district and floated high above the ground. The aircar he rented refused to park directly onto the building, so Ves had to use his smart clothing to ascend into the air.

"This is such an annoying custom. I'm glad the Bright Republic isn't as pretentious."

To the natives, such means kept the rabble out. Ves encountered no one else along the way as he reached his destination.

CALLISTO PROFESSIONAL RELATIONS

"Well, they certainly sound like they know what they are doing, Lucky."

"Meow."

A bubbly-looking representative of the company met him in the lobby of the building.

"Mr. Larkinson! It is such an honor to meet you!" The woman approached and shook his hand with vigor. "We here at Callisto Professional Relations are all devoted to matching you with the best possible partner in Centerpoint or beyond. You have chosen wisely to employ our services as we are one of the most successful agencies when it comes to high-end, upper-level matchmaking! Many Seniors and Masters are among our most satisfied customers!"

Ves politely smiled as he tried to jerk his hand back from the representative's enthusiastic handshake. "I know. I've read the reviews and testimonials."

"Let us head into my office to discuss your possible relationship further! My name is Irene Zircon by the way! Before you ask, I'm already spoken for, so don't get any ideas!"

"I wouldn't dream of it." Ves dryly replied.

Irene led Ves and Lucky to a very open and comfortable office. The entire interior of Callisto exuded a peculiar atmosphere. Projections of happy pairs of mech designers gave every guest a measure of hope that they would be able to enjoy the same kind of relationship.

As Ves and Irene took their seats, the representative resumed her spiel.

"Matching mech designers is one of the hardest jobs in the galaxy." She explained, though Ves doubted her claim. "We are more than aware that your kind are very strong-willed when it comes to your unique design philosophies. This is on top of the other elements that are in play. Any matchmaking service



can match two people together. It takes a special service to find a match between two very different mech designers."

Ves nodded in understanding. "But you claim you can always find a good match."

"Our success rate is very high. Much of our tech and methods are borrowed directly from the MTA. Even though we are situated in the galactic rim, we employ some of the most effective means devised to find suitable partners for mech designers like you! Less than 0.1 percent of our customers have applied for a refund!"

The company probably did everything they could to maintain their reputation. Ves figured that the actual number of dissatisfied customers was a lot bigger than Irene hinted.

"Can we move on to my situation?"

"Ah, of course, Mr. Larkinson. All of our systems went to work to search for a suitable partner. I'm very pleased to announce that we have found an exceptionally compatible match!"

Ves raised his eyebrow. That was a very confident claim to make. "How certain are you?"

"According to our finest AIs, the potential partner we've found for you is 87 percent compatible with you!"

"Is that high?"

"It is the highest we've seen in months! While it is true that machines can be wrong, we have passed your case to all of our relationship experts on hand. Each expert is very optimistic that your relationship will work! The only reason why the probably isn't higher is because both of you possess different backgrounds."

"Can you tell me about the match you've found?"

"We here at Callisto think it is best not to reveal too much information. The first impression is the most profound start of any relationship! Rather than describing her entire history and record to you, it is best to share your stories to each other during your dates. Still, there's little harm in telling you some details."

"Okay, let's hear it. I'd like to get at least some idea what I'm getting into."

"Please be assured that your match will definitely be to your liking, Mr. Larkinson. One encouraging sign is that she adores cats!"

Ves blinked. "Okay?"

"Ah, that is very helpful if you wish to seduce the match we've found. The woman we have in store for you has a cat as well. Although her pet is organic rather than a mechanical creation, I'm sure your cute mechanical cat will instantly grow on her. Who knows, perhaps your two pets will go along swimmingly! Whenever that happens, their owners are sure to bond as well!"

"Meow."

Lucky did not appear very impressed. Who was he? A noble gem cat! He was one of the most apex mechanical pets created by humanity! Not only did he possess full sentience, but he also developed a unique spiritual technique!

How could an ordinary blood-and-flesh cat compete against his majesty?!

To compare a supreme gem cat like him to an ordinary housecat was an affront to his esteemed and noble status!

Ves awkwardly laughed. He had never seen Lucky this conceited!

"Sorry about that, Irene. Lucky doesn't think that any other cat can match his splendor."

"Your Lucky is one of the most charming mechanical pets that I have ever seen." Irene complimented with starry eyes. "Forget about your match, hardly any other woman can resist his charm. He's just so cute and lovely!"

"Meow."

"Squeeeee!"

Ves coughed. "Can we get back to business?"

"Ah, my apologies. Ahem. Aside from sharing your love for cats, your match is also a talented mech designer. We are glad to announce that the Journeyman we've found is no less formidable than you. She obtained official recognition when she reached twenty-nine years old. Part of that is due to her background. Despite only receiving some mentoring, her family is quite influential in her home state."

"Where does she come from? From what it sounds like, she's not a Brighter."

"Ah, about that. Her origin is rather delicate. It is not very politic for me to reveal her home state to you. We think it is best to let her reveal that to you during your first date."

Ves furrowed his brows. That didn't sound very encouraging. "Does she come from another star sector or something?"

"Fortunately, no. Your match is very much a native of the Komodo Star Sector." Irene smiled. "Her background is much different from yours, however. While your family has a strong military heritage, her own family is a bit more notable. She comes from a line of politicians and government officials. Still, we don't believe that this will present a problem because your match is much more devoted to mech design to pay too much attention to politics."

Ves still expressed some skepticism. "Politics is very thorny. I don't mind differences in opinions, but I don't like it if it gets in the way."

"Rest assured that the beliefs of our match are highly agreeable with your own. Despite your different backgrounds, the two of you share much more in common than you think!"

The two of them spent a half hour discussing the match and what would happen next. Apparently, Callisto Professional Relations had already summoned his match and were preparing her for their first meeting and date.

When Ves heard this, he almost jumped from his seat. "I'm not prepared for a date!"

Irene critically studied Ves' appearance. "We'll have to give you a modest makeover. The grooming bots from your hotel have done a decent job at freshening you up, but they are programmed to make you look professional. If you want to capture a woman's heart, then you'll have to be more daring in the way you dress and groom yourself."

"I'm not psychologically prepared!"

"Oh, please. I'm sure you will do fine. Trust in our matchmaking. In my personal opinion, we could have hardly found a better woman for you to fall in love with! The two of you are a match made in heaven!"

Callisto Professional Matchmaking was very bold when it came to their boasts. However, the more Irene talked, the more Ves became apprehensive. He was a bit concerned at the speed they wanted to move.

Certainly, their AIs and relationship experts were certainly very sophisticated, but could they truly make an accurate judgement on a complex subject such as love?

He was about to find out. After Irene finished reassuring Ves, she guided him to a makeup room where a bunch of bots and experts quickly surrounded him and guided him deeper.

He was about to meet his match!

### Chapter 1279 First Impression

After an extensive makeover session, Callisto Professional Relations put him onto an aircar and shipped him over to a nearby upscale cafe that floated high above the ground. A mug of strange coffee steamed in front of him as he uncomfortably waited for his so-called date.

"Meow."

"I'm not nervous!" Ves hissed to his cat. "I'm just overwhelmed by how fast Callisto moved into action!"

Ves expected the matching to take a while. There were only so many Journeymen in Centerpoint, and even less who could match his age and design prowess. Of this small group, only a fraction might be looking for a companion.

Yet Callisto not only found a match in less than a day, but also arranged a first date immediately afterwards!

Still, despite his apprehension, Ves refused to interrupt the arrangements. He never lacked the courage to fight if the situation called for it, so why should he be scared at the prospect of meeting a girl?

He calmed down a bit. What was the big deal? He would just see for himself if Callisto's fabled methods truly found the perfect girlfriend for him. The matchmaking service possessed so much experience in this field that they hardly ever failed.

"If she's nice, then great. If she's not compatible, then it's no loss."

It was no different from using a golden lottery ticket from the System. There was a tiny chance of winning the jackpot, a modest chance of winning something nice and a depressingly large chance of winning nothing.

Even if Ves won nothing, he didn't lose anything either. He would have just wasted some time and money.

As Ves calmly drank his exotic coffee, Lucky suddenly sat up from the table.

"Meow!"

Moments later, the door to the private balcony slid open. Irene Zircon entered with a bright smile.

"My apologies for the wait, Mr. Larkinson. Your match was delayed due to some unforeseen circumstances. She has only just arrived and is on her way up. I must say that we've found quite a catch for you. She fits perfectly with you in almost every way! Go get her, tiger!"

Irene quickly left the balcony. A minute later, Ves heard the clack of heels as a young woman slowly approached the open door.

Both of them studied each other's appearances.

A woman in a modest red dress draped over by a larger coat appeared in his view. Her long dark hair fell around her lovely diamond-shape face as straight as an elegant curtain.

The woman was almost as tall as him but her body was graceful and svelte in a way that tantalized his eyes.

Despite her slender stature, her posture and the way she beheld herself presented an image of quiet confidence. Although the woman did not seem aggressive, Ves observed the typical aristocratic arrogance of those born in high station.

The woman reminded him uncomfortably of Vesian nobles, but even Vesians weren't this self-assured!

As first impressions went, Ves was very impressed with his date. Although he couldn't say whether the new arrival fit his type, she was certainly an

impressive woman on her own. So much so that Ves even doubted whether he was worthy of her attention!

"Miaow."

His musings were suddenly interrupted by the cat that padded after the woman.

A calico cat as elegant as her owner stopped and stared at Lucky, who became wary of the cat that encroached his space.

The two cats entered into a strange standoff as they both treated each other as intruders.

"Meow."

"Miaow."

"Meow."

"Miaow."

An amused giggle suddenly escaped from the young woman. "Clixie, don't be rude."

"Miaow!"

The cat, apparently called Clixie, still hadn't let down her guard. The woman shrugged her slim shoulders. "Please don't mind my cat."

"It's okay. Cats are like that." Ves almost stammered out.

Her voice instantly attracted him like a fish to water. Unlike the easy, casual accents that was common in the Bright Republic and much of the Friday Coalition, her accent was clipped and classy that was common in some Vesian nobles.

Fortunately, her accent was slightly distinct from that of the Vesians. It was slightly familiar to Ves but he couldn't recall which state it came from. All he

knew was that her giggle was so lovely that he could fall in love with that alone!

He interrupted his fascination as the woman slowly approached, her high heels clacking against the tiles of the private balcony.

She extended her hand. Ves hesitated whether he should act like those cheesy romances and kiss her small and slender hand, but he decided to act more like himself and shook it gently.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Ves Larkinson, Journeyman Mech Designer."

The woman gracefully smiled, causing dimples to appear on her cheeks. That was another turn-on for Ves!

"Likewise. I am Gloriana Wodin, also a Journeyman." After a few seconds, she raised her eyebrow. "You don't recognize the Wodin name?"

Ves shook his head. "Should I? I must say that I am not very familiar with all the notable clans, families, houses and dynasties in the star sector."

"Ah, it is my mistake. I forget that the significance of my name eludes many people at Centerpoint."

The woman sat down on the opposite side of the circular table to Ves. While Clixie and Lucky continued to keep their distance from each other, their owners sat comfortably within arm's reach.

Gloriana smiled at the behavior of their pets. "You have a lovely mechanical cat. I can see it's remarkable. Where did you ever find such a remarkable companion?"

"Lucky is a present from my father. I don't know where he obtained it, but what little I can tell is that my pet is probably an import from a first-rate superstate."



"Fascinating!" Gloriana responded as she kept admiring Lucky's distinctive metallic form. "Although Clixie resembles an ordinary calico housecat, she is in fact a purebred Rubarthan Sentinel Cat. Have you heard of this breed?"

Ves idly nodded. "It's a valuable breed that is rare and difficult to multiply due to their extensive genetic modification. They're smarter, gentler but also deadlier than baseline housecats. They're created by the Rubarthans to serve as the perfect companions to girls."

He had to admit that Clixie certainly looked smart enough to be sentient or close enough that the difference didn't matter.

"Meow!"

"Miaow!"

Their two cats didn't seem to be getting along with each other, though. They haunched their backs and looked like they were only two steps away from raking each other with their claws!

Nevertheless, the display only amused Gloriana further. "They're so cute. I bet they'll get along swimmingly soon enough."

"That's quite optimistic of you."

There was just something about Gloriana's smile that attracted him like a moth to flame. Callisto had done a really good job in matching him with a mech designer that he found fetching!

"So, Ves. Can I call you that? What can you tell me about yourself?" She asked while leaning in until her angular cheek pressed against her palm.

"Irene hasn't told me much about you, though she did mention that you are a valiant mech designer that comes from a valiant family."

"I'm a Larkinson." Ves smiled back while patting his chest. "You probably haven't heard about my family, but the Larkinsons are one of the notable

military lineages in the Bright Republic. Many potentates in our family have entered the military and served with honor. Each generation, several expert pilots emerge from their ranks. Currently, we have several, with a couple more expert candidates with his hopes of reaching this height."

"That's very impressive! The Larkinsons must be very distinguished in the Bright Republic. There is no shame for me to associate with a member of such an honorable stock."

"Ah, we're not as impressive as you think. The Bright Republic is dominated by the founding families, and the Larkinsons are not counted among them. Aside from my family's military focus, we haven't accumulated any power. That's slowly changing though since I became a Journeyman. The military doesn't pay as well as what my company earns by selling mechs."

Ves quickly realized that Gloriana paid special attention to his class and family. Personally, Ves thought it was silly to care about those inconsequential matters because they were both Journeymen.

Still, there was no harm in puffing his family up in front of this attractive young woman. Ves may not know much about her, but he already felt he wanted to do his best to earn her affection!

"What about you, Gloriana? You told me earlier that the Wodins are significant."

"The Wodin is a dynastic house that rules over a planet and is involved in regional politics." She mildly replied. "It is of no big concern to a foreigner like you. Most of my relatives are bureaucrats. Although some Wodins became mech pilots or mech designers over the years, I'm the first Wodin to achieve great success in my career. You could say our circumstances are similar in this regard. We are the future pillars of our respective families."

"I guess so. Our burden will only grow larger as we progress in our careers."

Ves nodded. Although the Wodins sounded as if they had more in common with a Vesian House rather than the Larkinson Family, the status of a Journeyman was quite exceptional in any state.

"I'm curious about your mechs." Gloriana raised, curiosity evident in her eyes. "I was very skeptical at Irene's claim that your design philosophy is a great match to mine. I quickly changed my mind when she showed me projections of your latest works. I'm particularly fascinated by your series of six Transcendent Messengers! Despite sharing a common root, each of them are also unique!"

"Are you aware of my design philosophy?"

"Irene mentioned that it's best if you describe it to me yourself."

"I'm not surprised." Ves smiled and shook his head. "It's not that easy to sum up. My design philosophy can be referred as metaphysical man-machine symbiosis. Rather than focus solely on the mech, I like to focus on the interaction between the mech and mech pilot. One of the most fundamental premises of my design philosophy is that the man-machine connection is more than a data-transfer channel. It connects the mech and mech pilot on multiple levels."

"Is that where this so-called 'metaphysical' component comes in?"

"Correct. Aside from a purely data transmission, there is also a metaphysical transmission that mutually empowers both sides with each other's strengths. Basically, I believe that this channel is often neglected. I've dedicated my entire design philosophy towards bringing out its potential, and I think I'm definitely on to something. Anyone who sees my best mechs up close and in person will be able to feel how the mechs are empowered and appear to come to life!"

While Ves did not mention anything about spirituality or psionics, he nonetheless did not feel like he needed to obfuscate his design philosophy so much.

He wanted to present his true self, or as much as he could afford to reveal. Either Gloriana would be weirded out by his mumbo-jumbo or she would accept it with an open mind.

Fortunately, Gloriana did not express anything impolite. She remained intrigued.

"Your design philosophy is Class IX, is it not?"

"It.. is." Ves said, feeling partially ashamed for some reason. "Regardless of what others think about my future possibilities, I have never doubted my design direction. My design philosophy is worth pursuing even if the entire galaxy has turned against my beliefs!"

"I can relate, Ves. It just so happens that I've developed a Class I design philosophy. I know how difficult it can be to be surrounded by fellow mech designers who don't think highly of my chances of reaching Master. I'm very pleased to meet a mech designer who knows what it is like to develop a radical belief on mech design."

That caused Ves to feel pleasantly surprised. Gloriana shared much more in common with him than he thought! He instantly grew curious about her approach to designing mechs.

"Are you willing to tell me about your design philosophy?"

"I would love to." Gloriana's smile grew wider. "To put it succinctly, I believe that for each mech pilot, a perfect vessel exists to express their full capabilities. Another way to put it is that I specialize in designing custom mechs!"

Interesting! Ves immediately became intrigued.

### Chapter 1280 Charming Match

"The perfect vessel, huh? I apologise for asking this, but how can a mech ever be described as perfect? Mechs are constantly getting better."

"The perfect mech and perfect vessel are two different concepts. A vessel is merely a container that accommodates something. I believe that the mech that best fits a mech pilot at present can be called the perfect vessel!"

Gloriana proudly replied.

"So you are pursuing the greatest fit between mechs and mech pilots?"

"Indeed, Ves. Theories have been developed about increasing the compatibility between the two by defining a specific shape and other parameters of a mech so that they are highly unified!"

"Does this mean that you don't design any mechs for the market?"

"I do not." Gloriana firmly shook her head. "I have eschewed designing any mechs meant for mass-production. I have no objections to their existence and their purpose but they are designed to fit decently with a large variety of mech pilots. I cannot stand the compromises that mech designers are compelled to make. I would much rather study mech pilots closely and develop a mech that possesses the perfect form for them to express their current and future level of skill!"

Ves was very impressed by her peculiar but bold design philosophy. As part of a Class I design philosophy, her design principles certainly tried to accomplish more than just focusing on a single aspect. Just the confidence she exuded when saying the word 'perfect' already underscored how strongly she believed in her notion!

Mech designers did not use this word lightly! For one to incorporate it into their very design philosophy said a lot about her conviction!

Although Ves privately thought that Gloriana was making it much harder for herself to advance to Master, he also admired her boldness in setting such an impossible goal.

A mech designer should be bold!

"So how do you apply your design philosophy in practice, Gloriana?"

"As I've stated earlier, I exclusively design custom mechs since the very start of my career. While it doesn't earn as much money as designing a regular commercial mech, I feel very fulfilled by designing a mech that is very suitable to a specific mech pilot."

"That must be rather exhausting work." Ves commented. "Your works don't have much impact, especially at first. What if the mech pilot crashes your mech into pieces during their first battle with their new machine?"

"I only claim to design the perfect vessel. Whether the mech pilots are competent enough to use my mechs to their fullest is their concern, not mine." Gloriana nonchalantly shrugged with her slender shoulders.

"How many mech pilots are using your mechs currently?"

"I have not kept track, exactly, but it is around a dozen at most."

That caused Ves to be very astounded. He always believed that mech designers needed to design mechs that needed to leave their mark on society to advance to Journeyman. For Gloriana to achieve this by producing only twelve mechs meant that some of her designs must be very impactful despite only being made once!

"I am very impressed by how you've managed to advance so quickly with such an ambitious design philosophy."

Gloriana kept smiling at Ves. "Too many mech pilots are sent into battle with mechs that don't fit their skills and preferences. Don't you think that's sad?"

There is a lot of missed potential there. Modern production methods allow us to tailor every mech to a specific mech pilot without too much added burden. Yet in the pursuit of maximum cost efficiency, we would rather reproduce the exact same rigid mech design over and over! It is as absurd as producing the exact same size of shoe for every human in the galaxy!"

"That's a very compelling argument, I admit." Ves responded, already feeling more and more besmitten by her classy voice and her charming expression. "Still, economic realities strongly encourage us to resort to mass market mechs. There aren't enough mech designers to cater to the needs of every mech pilot."

Gloriana smirked. "That's not entirely true. There are many Novices and Apprentices who are doing poorly. If they would stop designing something for the market and instead put their services at the disposal to a small number of mech pilots, I am certain they would be able to satisfy at least some customers rather than none."

"While there are a lot of low-ranking mech designers, not that many customers will want to enlist the services of someone bad."

"True. Nothing can be done about it. Mech designers can't force mech pilots to use their products." Gloriana sighed. "You don't have to be afraid of my disapproval. While it's a shame that many mech pilots are using standardized machines, it's an unfortunate reality. I just want to make life better for those who are willing to invest in the best custom mech."

Both of them started to become engrossed in discussing their professional principles. Ves was glad that she didn't dislike him for designing mass market mechs despite her personal focus on custom mechs. He would hate to spoil their relationship due to such a difference.

"I haven't designed many custom mechs, but it is definitely something that I will dip into occasionally." Ves stated. "According to Callisto, our design philosophies ought to be compatible with each other. Do you think that we could work together?"

"You tell me." Gloriana said. "Personally, I am hopeful. I have been searching for a suitable partner for a long time. Not anyone will do. The vast majority of mech designers specialize in improving or enhancing a single aspect. Some want to design the toughest mechs. Others want to design the best rifleman mechs. To be honest, their design philosophies do not add very much to mine."

"Why do you think that is so?"

"I'm quite competent in my technical design ability. Due to the nature of my design philosophy, I've developed a very solid foundation. I'm an all-rounder in terms of knowledge. While the help of other mech designers can add to my mech design, their roles are nonetheless marginal. Sometimes they even interfere with what I think the perfect vessel should be shaped."

"It must be difficult to find a mech designer to collaborate with, then. Class I design philosophies are quite ambitious in trying to cover everything by themselves."

"It is impossible for mech designers like us to achieve perfection in every aspect." Gloriana shook her head. "But as you said, we try. That does not mean we discount the value that others can bring to our works. More esoteric design philosophies such as yours improve aspects that we've never even heard about. I think your focus on metaphysical man-machine symbiosis is just one such example."

Ves was slightly optimistic as well. So far, it sounded as if Gloriana only focused on the physical form of a mech. He already knew that his design



philosophy was compatible with almost any other design philosophy, and this should be no different.

"I'm looking forward to what kind of mech we can design if we pool each other's strength." He cautiously remarked.

That was a little bit daring for him to say, but fortunately Gloriana kept smiling.

"I look forward to that as well. Both of our design philosophies try to achieve the same goal via different means. They are practically made for each other!"

"Meow."

"Miaow.."

"Meow meow!"

"Miaow miaow."

Though their design philosophies appear to be in perfect harmony, the same couldn't be said about their pets. Both cats seemed to disdain the other. Lucky even dropped down from the table to approach Clixie in an aggressive fashion!

"Lucky! Don't harm Gloriana's companion!" Ves warned.

"Clixie will be fine. She's a tough kitty."

"Ah, Lucky is not a harmless mechanical cat. He can be quite lethal if threatened. I just want to make sure he doesn't bring out his deadly arsenal."

"Interesting."

The two shared a brief moment of silence as they stared at the antics of their cats.

Both Ves and Gloriana grew more comfortable in each other's presence.

Suddenly, Gloriana spoke up again. "What do you think of me so far?"

"You're very beautiful."

"All women are beautiful." She coyly smiled. "Especially Journeymen. With how much money we earn, we spend a fortune on refining our appearances. Surely you must know that, Ves."

"Everything is artificial if you look into something deep enough. Why quibble over these inconsequential matters? Perhaps a better way to describe it is that I appreciate your aesthetic standards. You're as beautiful as a mastercrafted mech!"

Gloriana giggled. Her voice rang like melodious bells. "What an odd compliment. I like it! You don't look too bad yourself, though I bet that the makeup and fashion help you've received played a large part in that. Not that we should quibble over that, right?"

"Right."

"Nevertheless, you are still different from every other male mech designer I've met. We only know each other for less than an hour and I feel like we are already close. Don't you think so?"

"I agree." Ves happily replied. "I enjoy your company. I did not think I would meet a mech designer as lovely as you. The only way our meeting could be more perfect is if our cats could get along with each other!"

"Oh, you charmer!" She giggled.

"I aim to please."

Once she stopped giggling, Gloriana addressed him again. "To be honest, I was not entirely forthcoming with you earlier. I wanted to see whether you approve of my design philosophy and if we could get along."

"Have I met your expectations?"

The woman directed an intrigued smile at him. "Would I look as happy if you didn't? I'm very content with you so far. The thing is that while I've withheld some information, so have you. I know you haven't revealed the full extent of your design philosophy."

Ves furrowed his brows. How did she know? "My design philosophy is very difficult to describe, but I've earnestly tried to explain the basic gist of what I'm trying to achieve."

For the first time since they met, Gloriana dropped her smile in favor of a reproachful expression. "That is not what Irene has said and shown. I've pulled some strings in order to access the information that Irene has obtained about you. Let me show you."

Gloriana raised her smooth and slender wrist and activated her comm. Once the interface came to life, she browsed the menus until her comm projected a recording.

Ves immediately recognized the footage.

"...I believe that there is much more to improve! It is an attribute that is intricately tied to the mech pilots of the mechs!"

"And that is?"

"Divinity!"

"...Divinity?" The professor questioned.

"Yes! Divinity! Godhood!" Ves raved. "It wasn't until..."

"...Don't you see, professor? Mechs are capable of coming alive because they receive the worship of their mech pilots! This is the secret to Ylvainan transcendence!..."

"...My design philosophy believes that as long as mechs are designed in a certain fashion, they can capture the worship of the mech pilots and come alive under their control as gods!"

"...Instead, I'll become known as a designer of gods! My creations may look like machines, but hidden inside is beating the metaphysical hearts of gods! This is my ultimate aspiration! This is the future of mech design! Countless people will worship my new gods! In exchange, my gods will fight on behalf of their worshippers! No ordinary mech will be able to withstand the might of my gods! Not even god pilots will be able to withstand the flood of mass-produced gods!..."

An awkward silence ensued.

Ves felt so embarrassed that he wanted to do nothing more than to find a hole to burrow into! How could Gloriana obtain this footage! She must probably think he was crazy!

"It is a pity..." Gloriana disapprovingly shook her head. "You are great company, and our design philosophies seem to match so well at first, yet..."

Uh oh.