

Chapter 1281 Perfect Match

"You are great company, and our design philosophies seem to match so well at first, yet..."

Ves hung his head low. The earlier footage was already damning enough. How could his meeting with Professor Oodiv of the MTA be leaked to Gloriana? There should be a law against that!

Still, no matter how much he protested, it wouldn't change the fact that Gloriana had the wrong idea about him! When he spewed all of that nonsense about creating gods to the MTA, he merely wanted to fool them into believing he was a nutjob. He never wanted his date to witness him at his worst!

"...yet it's even better. In fact, it's almost perfect!"

"Please don't misunderstand, Gloriana! I was not entirely myself at that moment." He tried to explain. "I'm not as extreme as I looked like during that meeting! I.. wait what?"

"I said it's perfect!" Gloriana reiterated with a brilliant smile. "You sound so sincere and passionate of your ambitious beliefs that I have no doubt you expressed your true feelings at that moment!"

Ves blinked at the woman. "You are not.. repelled or anything?"

"Repelled? Why should I?" She look genuinely confused.

"Because of the wild stuff I said?"

"Oh, my goodness, Ves! I can see why you would think that way, but I am not like most mech designers. You see, much of the beliefs you express back then happens to resonate with my own."

"Uhh.." Ves became speechless.

"I've looked into the Ylvainan Faith and though I don't agree with many of their tenets, there are some points that it shares in common with my own faith."

"You're a believer?"

"I never told you that I wasn't." Gloriana giggled in a happy manner. Her eyes practically curled with glee! "I suppose it's time to come clean with you. I'm a proud follower of hexism!"

"...Hexism? You mean the not-quite-state religion of the Hexadric Hegemony? But that would mean..." His eyes widened even further. "You're a Hexer!"

"You guessed it! The Wodin Dynasty may not be one of the matriarchal dynasties, but we are loyal vassals to one. To be more precise, we are strongly aligned with the Evern Dynasty, who are the foremost proponents of hexism!"

Ves had heard a bit about hexism. Although the Hexadric Hegemony wasn't entirely religious, many citizens believed in this strange and very eccentric faith.

Perhaps one of their most famous habits was that they worshipped the number six! They liked to be ruled by six matriarchs. They liked to deploy their mechs in half-squads of six, and their larger mech units ultimately consisted of multiples of six!

Their worship of the number six extended to other areas!

For example, they preferred to eat six smaller cookies instead of two bigger bigger. They liked to wear shirts with six buttons. They liked to round out the prices of their products with the number six!

While they didn't insist that everything should conform to the number six, the more, the better!

And this was only the least of what it meant to believe in the religion or philosophy of hexism!

"Since you're familiar with hexism, you should know what we believe about the afterlife." Gloriana remarked. "We believe that life and afterlife are two sides of the same coin! We believe that humans have the potential to become equals to gods, and that gods are nothing different from empowered humans. While we are not as enthusiastic about the Ylvainan notion that the same applies to aliens, other than that there is a lot of overlap between our beliefs! Isn't that great, Bright Martyr?"

Ves felt like puking. "I never approved of that nickname. I'm a Brighter!"

"You don't have to be modest, Ves." Gloriana leaned forward and placed her hand on his arm. "You don't have to hide that you are special and that you carry a great purpose. Ever since I listened to that recording, I became convinced that you are the mech designer that I have long been waiting for. Your design philosophy is so radical and extreme that my heart has never felt any hotter. You are perfect!"

It was only now that Ves realized why he ended up in this absurd situation. It was because of Callisto's sophisticated matchmaking process! Irene claimed that Callisto drew from the records of the MTA to help them find a suitable match.

Normally, that wouldn't be a problem, because no mech designer would be stupid to be dishonest in front of the MTA. Normally, their records on mech designers were very accurate.

The only exception was his own record! Professor Oodiv probably described him as a superstitious, delusional mech designer in his record. Perhaps the Senior had outright judged that he was a religious nut!

Ves thought that would be the end of the matter, but he overlooked a very important detail.

Callisto Professional Relations tried to match him with another mech designer by taking his record into account!

Who paired best with a religious nut?

Another religious nut!

Although their beliefs didn't entirely match with each other, Callisto probably judged that they could reconcile their differences. Obviously, their sophisticated matchmaking AIs and highly-experienced experts all thought highly of their pairing!

Yet it was all a lie! Gloriana was anything but a perfect match to Ves! The cold, hard truth was that she was compatible with a mistaken impression of him! It was all based on a lie!

"I'm not a follower of hexism. I don't think I'll ever convert to your beliefs."

"That's fine, Ves. Hexism isn't as strict as the Ylvainan Faith when it comes to demanding piety! Just acting in the interests of our philosophies is sufficient! Let it not be said that we are narrow-minded!"

This was starting to creep Ves out! He firmly tried to jerk his arm away from Gloriana's grasp, but her fingers began to dig into his skin. She didn't want to let go!

"Could you let go, please?"

She ignored his request! "Your design philosophy is perfect! Although I had to adjust some of my beliefs, I'm fully taken in by your ambition to elevate mechs into gods! In fact, I believe that the mech pilots who use your mechs will be raised into gods as well! Isn't that what symbiosis implies? With my assistance, your design philosophy stands a much greater chance of being

realized! The mechs we design together will be so perfect that they will eventually become indistinguishable from real gods!"

"Please, Miss Wodin. This is all a horrible misunderstanding! I'm a secularist. You shouldn't take some of the stuff I've said so seriously."

Gloriana's eyes sparkled at him as if he was her soulmate! "You don't have to pretend with me, Ves. And don't call me Miss Wodin. My name is Gloriana. I love nothing more than to hear you say my name. Only few men ever get to call me that, and you are definitely one of them! You should feel honored!"

Ves tried to lean away but Gloriana firmly kept hold. Although Ves could have used a bit more force to separate himself from the woman, he really didn't want to offend a Hexer!

"Gloriana, you're an esteemed citizen of a second-rate state. Why would you waste your time with a pathetic third-rater like me? The gulf between us is too wide! I could never match your worth!"

The woman briefly frowned. "That's not a problem. The Wodin Dynasty will accept my betrothal to you if I have anything to say about it. As a promising mech designer, my word will be heard. Besides, despite your humble origins, your family isn't too bad either. You don't need to put yourself down. You're a Journeyman! Have some pride!"

"Erm, but you're still a Hexer. Don't you people believe that women should be in charge? I don't think I can feel comfortable in your company."

"Ves, Ves, Ves. While it's true that I'm a Hexer, I think it is you who are misunderstanding something. Just because I agree that women are the superior doesn't mean that men should be treated like dirt! Goodness, no! Like boys, men need our protection! Don't worry, Ves. Once I'm in your life, I will make sure to protect you like any proper woman ought to do! That is what being a Hexer truly means!"

Was Ves some kind of baby who needed to be breastfed or something? This was ridiculous! If nothing else, it should be the men who were required to proclaim they would protect their lovers!

"I don't think we'll be a good couple. Just look at our cats! They're practically about to claw each other's faces!"

Both Ves and Gloriana directed their gazes to their cats.

"Meow~"

"Miaow~"

Different from what Ves expected, Lucky and Clixie hadn't drawn out their claws. Instead of looking like they were about to fight, they were instead pressing against each other! Clixie comfortably purred while Lucky groomed the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat by licking the top of her head!

"...That wasn't according to the script." Ves belatedly said.

"Hihihi! They're so cute!" Gloriana giggled. "Cats always need some time to grow familiar with each other. Both Lucky and Clixie are smart, so it's no surprise that they've come to like each other! In fact, if Lucky wasn't mechanical, I'd even allow him to breed with Clixie!"

"What a shame." Ves replied flatly. "Even if Lucky and Clixie have gotten along, that is no indicator that our relationship can be just as good. We're too different!"

"I don't think so." Gloriana stubbornly shook her head. "I think there's hardly any mech designer who's more compatible to me than you, Ves. The moment Callisto called me up was the moment I knew that I would no longer be alone. Now that I've met you in the flesh, I'm pleasantly surprised. You're charming, handsome, honorable, daring and brilliant! Not only that, but both our pets and our design philosophies go well with each other!"

"I am flattered by your praise, but to be honest I don't identify with your description. I'm not a good person. I've got blood on my hands. I'm a liar, swindler and a cheat! I'm selfish and a coward! I'm one of the most deplorable mech designers in the galaxy!"

"Ves!" Gloriana harshly admonished him. "If this is your attempt to make me pity you, then you should cut it out. There's no need to belittle yourself. I know you're a wonderful mech designer. Everything I've said about you is definitely true! Please believe me when I say that you are perfect as you are right now. If there are any difficulties between us, I'm sure we can work it out!"

Okay, Ves was getting increasingly more disturbed by Gloriana. She was a complete nutjob! The longer he stayed in her presence, the more he feared for his sanity!

Although Ves really didn't want to be too forceful, he no longer cared about that. He gripped her hand which clung tightly on his other hand and pried it away.

"I'm glad you think so well of me, but can you wait for a minute? I need to visit the bathroom for a moment. Can I have some time alone?"

"Oh. Sure. I'll be awaiting your return." Gloriana smiled.

Ves tried to maintain his calm. He casually rose from his seat and maintained a brittle smile on his face. He crept over to Lucky and picked up his contented cat.

The traitor had been cuddling with Clixie!

"Meow?!"

"I'll be taking Lucky with me as well. You don't want him to treat the floor as his litterbox. Not only does his waste products smell, but they're also radioactive!"

"Meow!"

Lucky objected to that description!

Ves didn't care whether Gloriana bought his excuse. He pressed Lucky against his chest and hastily jogged out of the balcony.

Once he went out of sight, he broke out in a run! He passed right by the entrance of the men's restroom and ran straight down the stairs and to the exit of the cafe!

As soon as he emerged outside, he jumped out of the floating building and practically fell to the ground! Only when he fell halfway did he engage his smart clothing's antigrav module.

"I need to get out of here!" He panicked. "The sooner I'm rid of Gloriana, the better!"

Chapter 1282 Pursuit of Perfection

Minutes passed as Gloriana quietly sat at the cafe table. She idly lifted up Ves' half-empty mug of cooling coffee and savored the taste.

She smiled. "No sweetener. We share the same taste. Perfect."

Her eyes curled up in contentment as she gently stroked Clixie's furry back. Gloriana had waited so long to find a suitable boyfriend who complimented her both personally and professionally.

Very few men met her high standards. Although she dated several men whose company she enjoyed, none of their design philosophies brought anything special to the table.

"They are so uncreative and unoriginal." Her beautiful face briefly scrunched up. "How can they ever amount to anything when they don't dare to think big? Fortunately, Ves is anything but a coward. His design philosophy is so ambitious! Not only is he trying to pioneer something entirely new and

unprecedented, he also wants to evolve mechs into literal gods! Only an ambitious man such as him is worthy to be my partner in life! Don't you agree, Clixie?"

"Miaow."

"I'm glad you agree as well! That Lucky is kind of cute. Shame about his mechanical state, but I'm sure Ves could do something about that down the line once his design philosophy progresses. I'm sure we can come up with something."

"Miaow!"

As Gloriana daydreamed about her latest and strongest crush to date, a nervous-looking Irene entered the private balcony.

"Miss Wodin, I have come with bad tidings. Mr. Larkinson has begged off the remainder of your first date due to regrettable circumstances."

Gloriana frowned again. "He left?"

"He left. It may be that he has gotten cold feet."

"Cold feet? But he's perfect for me!" The Journeyman slammed her fist against the table! "We fit so well together! He called me beautiful! I could see the desire in his eyes when he stared at me! How could he run off all of a sudden?!"

"It is not unheard of for both men and women to be overwhelmed even when everything has gone right during their first meeting with their matches." Irene carefully explained. "Humans are fragile creatures. Due to your instructions, we did bring Mr. Larkinson to meet with you before he could mentally adjust to the rapid change in circumstances. If he is socially awkward, it is not too surprising for him to decide he wants more space for the moment."

"Is that so?" Gloriana asked with a quiver on her lip. "Did he truly run because he was overwhelmed? I've never seen anything like this. Shouldn't he be courageous? What if he thinks I'm ugly?!"

Irene quickly shook her head. "Have no fear of that. We've monitored your entire first meeting and all of our indicators suggest that Mr. Larkinson was absolutely smitten with you! It is only when you expressed admiration at the more radical components of his design philosophy that he suddenly panicked. According to our advanced AIs and experienced relationship experts, he has likely suffered an involuntary anxiety attack because you directly confronted him on one of his deepest ambitions that he has never wanted to share with you so soon."

"That.. makes sense." Gloriana calmed down a bit. "It is my mistake. I should have never moved so fast and brought up something so sensitive during our first date. I just got so caught up by the moment that I thought we were already inseparable from that point onwards! How inconsiderate of me! Am I a bad lover?"

"No no no!" Irene swung her hands. "That is absolutely not the case! No relationship starts off with everything going right. Just like designing a difficult mech, you have to overcome all kinds of challenges in order to succeed. Mr. Larkinson's abrupt departure should not reflect badly on your appeal! I'm sure he will want to crawl back to you once he realizes how compatible you are to him! All of our data-driven analyses support that conclusion!"

"I have faith in your agency's judgement." Gloriana nodded. "I have not waited in Centerpoint for so long and let my most perfect boyfriend slip away from my grasp. Now that I have met with Ves, I am absolutely certain that no other man is more ideal than him! I cannot imagine living without having him by my side!"

Gloriana waited so long to find the perfect man. Though Ves did not completely fit the perfect mold that she had imagined, he came closer than any other date she's met so far.

Due to her status and her design talent, she was a very desirably catch to many mech designers. Yet even when she briefly deigned to lower her standards to Apprentices, none of their design philosophies sparked with her own. Either they were completely neutral or they interfered with her methods.

She wouldn't be so smitten with Ves if his design philosophy hadn't excited her this much. His wild ambitions notwithstanding, just its surface concepts already appealed to her in a strong way.

Gloriana pursued the perfect vessels for mech pilots on a purely physical level.

Ves sought the greatest mutual strengthening between mechs and mech pilots on a non-physical level.

Although they had yet to collaborate on a single mech design, Gloriana carefully studied Ves' mech designs. The special qualities they held did not come close to encroaching her own principles.

The Aurora Titan particularly sparked her interest. It was her lover's first formal collaborative mech design. Seeing how Ves effortlessly enabled Professor Coras Ventag to bring out the full strength of his design philosophy gave Gloriana a lot of hope!

"I must have Ves." She declared with utmost conviction. "I will not allow him to slip away from my fingers. Not when we're so perfect together!"

Irene's smile grew a little more nervous. Of all the clients she served, Gloriana had been the thorniest one so far. The Hexer was beautiful, talented, rich and part of an influential family in one of the most powerful states of the star sector.

Yet Callisto Professional Relations was quite aware that mech designers, especially high-ranking ones, tended to be eccentric.

For example, the record she perused on Ves mentioned that he occasionally made reckless decisions. This trait had likely emerged from his illustrious family background.

As for Gloriana, her pursuit of perfection went beyond her philosophy towards mechs. Anything of importance had to be perfect, or at least as close to it as possible.

While she was realistic enough that not every aspect of her life could be perfect, she couldn't stand a situation where perfection was possible but obtained in the areas she cared about. Once she wanted something to be perfect, she would do her very best to come as close to it as possible!

Such a demanding attitude was the secret to her success. Gloriana broke from the Wodin Dynasty's traditions and became a rising star in the mech community because she always pushed herself to be the best!

Advancing to Journeyman when she turned twenty-nine years old was an amazing accomplishment and worthy of recognition.

Although the MTA did not have too much hope for her ambitious Class I design philosophy, she might just be able to realize it due to her constant insistence on demanding perfection from herself!

The MTA's mild favor towards Gloriana showed in how much Callisto Professional Relations bent the rules and accommodated some of her demands. Normally, Irene would never leak parts of someone else's record to another client, but the Hexer was special.

The strongest proof that Gloriana enjoyed the favor of the MTA was that they gifted her with a Rubarthan Sentinel Cat!

While such a cat wasn't hard to obtain in the New Rubarth Empire, for one to emerge in the galactic rim took quite a bit of effort. For all of their intelligence and their long lives, their genetic enhancements also made them difficult to breed. Each Rubarthan Sentinel Cat was quite a prize in any far-flung star sectors!

It is because Gloriana enjoyed the favor of the MTA that Irene did not wish to see her disappointed. She thought carefully on how to mend the growing gap between her two clients.

"While I know you're eager to secure your new lover, I advise you to take it slow. After studying of Mr. Larkinson's record and additional material, I've noticed a very pertinent detail. He never had a girlfriend."

That caused Gloriana to blink. "He's a virgin?"

"Most likely."

"That's... that's perfect!" Gloriana grinned and giggled. "Hihihi! I'll be his first!"

"Miss Wodin, please, if you don't wish to make Mr. Larkinson anxious, I highly recommend you to restrain some of your enthusiasm. For all of Mr. Larkinson's courage in battle and in mech design, he is woefully insecure when it comes to relationships. You will have to win him over gradually in the same manner as boiling a frog alive."

"I see." Gloriana remarked. "Ves is a frog who jumps out of the pan as soon as the water heats up too rapidly. I'll have to heat him up gradually so that he won't escape until he's completely cooked! Yum!"

Irene nodded over and over. "I'm sure Mr. Larkinson will come to appreciate your company in due time. For now, I would advise you to maintain frequent contact with him. I think it will help if you limit yourself with comm calls and messages for now. You can also delight him by sending presents to him if you

would like. He will feel compelled to send presents back, and that will force him to think about you more."

That sounded a bit too slow to Gloriana. What if Ves met some other harlot along the way and stole his affection from her? It would be a disaster! Her perfect relationship would be ruined!

"How soon can I meet with him in person again? I ache for his touch!"

"Not too quickly! Both of you will need to calm down. The first impression you've left on Mr. Larkinson is already great. Once his anxiety fades, I am certain that his desire for you will reemerge."

"He is a native of the Bright Republic, right? Perhaps I'll have to pay a visit there sometime. Now that I've met my perfect man, I no longer wish to linger here. Centerpoint has long lost its charm for me. Only Ves can brighten up my life!"

A loving sigh escaped from her delicate lips. Despite the sudden end to their first date, Gloriana did not begrudge Ves too much for running away. How could someone so perfect for her be so easy to catch?

In fact, the challenge only spurred her on. She was more than confident that her beauty, her personality and her design capabilities would win Ves over!

"Where is he right now, Irene?" She asked.

"The planet's monitoring network has observed him entering an aircar. He has set his destination straight towards the nearest spaceport. He has also contacted his personal starship and instructed his crew to prepare the vessel for departure."

Gloriana frowned. "Where is he traveling to? Is he returning to the Bright Republic?"

"Apparently, no. According to the intelligence that we've obtained, Mr. Larkinson is departing for Leemar."

"Leemar? As in the Leemar System in the territory of the Carnegie Group?"

"Correct. Mr. Larkinson is a nominal disciple of Master Carmin Olson of the Vermeer Group."

"Damn!" The mech designer cursed. "I can't enter the Friday Coalition! Ves is getting further and further away from me! What if some floozy from the Coalition sidles up to him and steals his heart? I can't allow that to happen!"

"Considering Mr. Larkinson's love history, I don't think you'll have to be afraid of that. In fact, I think it is best to leave him to his business until he departs again. There are no signs that Mr. Larkinson intends to relocate to the Coalition permanently."

"Good. You won't be able to hide from me forever, Ves. Now that I've caught your scent, you'll never be able to escape no matter how far you run!"
Gloriana exulted.

Chapter 1283 True Love

Ves practically hurled himself past the airlock and into the familiar confines of the Barracuda. Behind him, the transit shuttle that took him out of one of Centerpoint V's space stations separated from the ship now that it had completed its task.

"It's about time I've returned!"

"Meow!"

"Oh, shut it. You've hardly met Clixie, and now you're already missing her? Newsflash Lucky, she's organic!"

"Meow meow!"

"What do you mean true love transcends all barriers? The two of you are completely different lifeforms!"

Ves ignored his nonsensical cat and ran all the way up to the bridge.

"Captain, get us out of this star system as fast as possible!"

"As you will, sir, but I have to ask, why the hurry? Are you in trouble with the authorities? It is highly inadvisable to run from the MTA if they have a reason to compel you to stay."

"Nothing like that is going on." Ves vigorously shook his head. "I've just met someone scary and I need to get out of her reach. The longer we stay in Centerpoint, the greater the risk of meeting her again!"

Though Captain Silvestra and the rest of the crew looked confused, they nonetheless moved to coordinate with the Greenfeather to leave the Centerpoint System.

The only snag was that traffic control did not allow them to depart with all haste. They needed to follow their assigned route that brought them to the back of a long line of ships waiting to jump out of the system. It took far too long for the Barracuda and Greenfeather to trundle their way to the closest Lagrange point.

Gavin entered the stateroom where Ves had holed himself. "What's got you in such a tizzy, Ves?"

A part of Ves wanted to hide what he experienced earlier. Yet he also felt the need to confide in someone at least.

A sigh escaped from his lips. "A date gone wrong, I guess."

That caused Gavin to become twice as interested. "Did you fall flat on your face or something? Was the woman you met not to your liking?"

"It's complicated, Benny."

"Come on, boss. Tell me what's wrong."

Ves briefly recounted his date with Gloriana, though he left out a lot of sensitive details.

This caused Gavin to develop an incomplete picture. "I don't see what's wrong about this Gloriana. Other than the fact that she's clingy and that she's a Hexer, it sounded as if the two of you got along well."

"You don't understand! Gloriana is.. she's a Hexer! Not only that, but she's also a follower of hexism! Don't you see what that means? She's as fanatical in her beliefs as the Poxcos of the Ylvaine Protectorate!"

"I do admit that the Hexadric Hegemony is weird, but hexism doesn't have that bad of a reputation. Everything I've learned about it is that it's more of a philosophy with some superstition sprinkled on it than a full blown absolute belief system like the Ylvainan Faith. They're much more tolerant to nonbelievers and individual interpretations."

"It's much worse than that! Gloriana is a nutcase!"

How could Ves explain how Gloriana bought into his nonsense story about creating gods? Any mech designer who not only took him at his word, but also supported it entirely should be avoided at all cost!

There was no way Ves could imagine spending the rest of his life with someone so delusional!

Gavin shook his head. In his opinion, Ves was being a scaredy cat. "Alright, whatever you say, boss. It's your life. The reason I came here is to inform you that we are hosting an irate guest aboard the Barracuda. The man has been throwing a temper tantrum ever since some MTA goons forced us to take him in! You wouldn't have anything to do with that, do you?"

Ah. Ves remembered the task the Rim Guardians pushed onto his lap before they booted him out of the Pit.

"Is the guest a danger to himself, the crew or the ship?"

"No. He's mostly whiny, that's all."

"Then leave the guest in his cabin or wherever else you put him in. I'll meet with him later. Right now, I need a moment to myself."

"Okay then. I'll leave you alone. The Barracuda is scheduled to transition into FTL in twelve hours, barring any delays."

Once Gavin left his stateroom, Ves sighed and plopped down on his bed. Lucky sidled up to his head and pressed a paw against his head.

"Come on, Lucky. Didn't you see how suddenly Gloriana went off the deep end when she raved about my supposed design principles? Even if she's lovely and fun to be with, she's too dangerous!"

"Meow."

"What do you mean I'm the same as her? We're nothing alike! I'm a sane, normal mech designer who just wants to make mechs alive! How does that sound crazy?"

"Meow!"

"I don't agree with you!" Ves huffed and turned around.

As he thought back on Gloriana, he had to admit that he still felt a lingering attraction towards her. No other woman excited him as much as her. She'd be perfect for him if she didn't come from the Hegemony!

Yet Ves did not believe that anything perfect could exist. He had always lived his life in the assumption that aiming for perfection only set himself up for disappointment.

"Life and the galaxy are both messy. They're also more exciting because of that. Who wants to live a perfect life?"

Though Ves hadn't interacted with Gloriana too deeply, he could immediately tell that she adopted a very different perspective on the matter.

A part of him admired her for that. He was attracted to her boldness and her courage. She must be a great mech designer as well.

"Did I run away too quickly?"

He really found it regretful to abandon his date with Gloriana so soon. Other than her weird Hexer beliefs, Ves truly felt comfortable in her presence.

Not only did he find her lovely and attractive, but her design philosophy also complimented well with his own.

"How great would it be to design a mech together?" He idly sighed. "Even if she's only limited to designing custom mechs, there are plenty of mech pilots I care about who can use a better machine than what I can provide alone."

For example, he could elevate Melkor and the other Larkinsons in the Avatars of Myth to an untold height if he gifted them with mechs that contained the combined strengths of Ves and Gloriana.

Such machines wouldn't only be great on a spiritual and a technical level, but also lead to synergistic effects that Ves could hardly fathom.

These benefits, while unpredictable, would definitely elevate the quality of their custom mechs to an unseen height!

"What would it be like if I can supply Melinda, Raella and Jannzi with such custom mechs? The achievements they can make with these wonder mechs will definitely surpass anything they could have ever hoped!"

Ves saw a great opportunity in front of him, but he turned away after seeing all the thorns in his path. Did he really make the right decision?

He recalled the Mech Designer's Oath that he had sworn just days ago.

"I did swear to do my best to serve the needs of mech pilots."

Although Ves did not take the Mech Designer's Oath very seriously, he did agree with some of its principles to some degree. Due to his design philosophy, he always tried to accommodate mech pilots whenever he could.

Therefore, the thought of abandoning such a great opportunity to design better mechs pained him a lot.

Ves even had the illusion that his design philosophy was crying in his mind!

"Goddammit, not you to? You're supposed to be a part of me! Since when can you think for yourself?!"

He slapped his head, only to wince in pain.

"Stupid!"

The more he wanted to forget about Gloriana, the more her face emerged from his memories. He couldn't just put his mind off her. He enjoyed such a good time with her that he already started to miss her company!

His comm suddenly beeped. Ves raised his comm to see that he received an official MTA hail.

"What does the MTA want from me?" He frowned, but accepted the call nonetheless. "Maybe it's the Rim Guardians or something."

No MTA officer appeared from the projection in front of him. Instead, a familiar angular face came into view.

"Gloriana!"

"Ves! I've missed you so much!"

Ves immediately tried to activate the command that would end the call, but his comm didn't accept it! It forcibly kept the call going!

Gloriana apparently saw what he was doing and tutted at him. "Don't bother. I've borrowed official MTA channels to make this call. Every comm comes with overrides for the Big Two. You'll have to jam or destroy your comm in order to halt this call."

He was just about to do so, but Gloriana sent him a sharp glare that made him feel that he would regret the action!

"Ves! Are you so cowardly that you can't even face a girl? What are you afraid of? Tell me. I don't bite."

How could he tell her that he was scared of her due to her fanatical beliefs? How could he say that he lied to the MTA about his design philosophy over a communication channel that was directly controlled by that very same organization?

The silence stretched as Gloriana awaited an answer that would never come. Ves simply couldn't think of an acceptable excuse.

Eventually, she sighed. "You're such a boy, Ves. I thought you were supposed to be a daring and fearless mech designer. It's so disappointing to see you cower from a date with me. You think I'm pretty, right?"

Seeing her face over the projection made it unbearable for Ves to say no.

"You are. You're really beautiful. I love it when you smile."

Gloriana did just that. The dimples that emerged instantly made her twice as lovely!

"Irene told me that you were having an anxiety attack or something. Though I'm disappointed, I won't hold it against you. We can still make our relationship work!"

"I'm not so sure." He said. For some reason, all of his courage fled him at this moment. He found it way too hard to say no! "We are very different people. You're a Hexer. I'm a Brighter."

"Didn't we already move on from this? Where we come from doesn't matter to me! Even if you're from the frontier, I would still love you for who you are! Love has no boundaries!"

How could Gloriana say the same thing as Lucky?!

"I really don't think it's a good idea for you to hook up with me. I'm strongly aligned to the Friday Coalition. We're practically enemies in a way! There's no way the Hegemony and the Coalition will approve of our relationship!"

She frowned. "Do you think these are ancient times? Plenty of happy couples between Hexers and Fridaymen have emerged over the years. While the Hegemony doesn't particularly like them, they're willing to let them pass so long as they don't get involved in any strategically-important activities. I could just move in with you in the Bright Republic!"

"I doubt Master Olson would approve!"

"You're just a nominal disciple." Gloriana smirked. "You could renounce your apprenticeship. As a Journeyman, you have many more options available if you are in need of something special. Becoming a Master Mech Designer's lapdog is unbecoming for a mech designer of your ambition."

Ves shook his head. "I'm not going to renounce Master Olson."

"We'll see how long you stick to that stance." Gloriana teased. "My perfect lover shouldn't be so crass to continue to associate with the Coalition. The Hegemony can provide you with much more assistance as long as I use some of my connections! I could even pull some strings and turn you into a full-fledged citizen of the Hegemony! That way, your old citizenship will no longer pose a hindrance to our union! We'll both become a happy pair of Hexers!"

This woman was completely delusional!

Chapter 1284 William Urbesh

After rambling for five straight minutes about her fantasies, Gloriana abruptly halted.

"Ah, sorry there Ves. I didn't want to overwhelm you with my aspirations. Irene warned me that I shouldn't get carried away in front of you. I hope I haven't frightened you too much with my forwardness."

That was the least of his problems with Gloriana!

"...It's okay."

"That's great!" She grinned. "I should probably get going now, but know that you will always be in my heart! I'll be in touch again. In the meantime, I hope you keep thinking of me. I'll definitely help you overcome your anxiety. Bye bye!"

The comm call finally ended, leaving Ves behind with two conflicting emotions. One part of him deeply wanted to grow closer to Gloriana. Another part of him strongly urged him to do the opposite!

Neither side could eliminate the other. Both maintained a tenuous balance.

"Am I overreacting or am I being prudent?"

No matter how much Ves wanted to repress his attraction towards Gloriana, his heart was not that easy to deceive. He still possessed a crush on her. Even her confidence that she could make her relationship work was attractive to him. He felt deeply flattered that she still wanted him after he stiffed her on their first date!

"Yet this woman is really something else."

Her background and her extreme opinions wouldn't have been such a big deal for Ves if she did not believe in them so earnestly.

He wasn't specifically against religion. It was more in how fanatic she became when she expressed her ideals.

Ves met a lot of fanatics in his life. People like Doctor Jutland, the Vesian rebels, the Bentheim rebels, the worshippers of Haatumak, the True Believers and so on all turned into unhinged extremists due to the strength of their beliefs!

"At some point, devotion turns into madness!"

He had many awful experiences with fanatics who believed in their own cause. They couldn't be reasoned with and common sense was dearly in short supply. How could Ves ever be comfortable in their presence when they were one step away from insanity?

Yet... was Gloriana as bad as the others?

"She's smart and not that all close to going out of control." Ves admitted. Sure, she was a little too eager to chase after him, but a part of him felt very happy about that. "I can't put Gloriana in the same box as the likes of the Bentheim Liberation Movement and the New Ylvaine Dynasty. When it comes down to it, she's just a strong-willed mech designer, kind of.. like myself."

Every Journeyman held strong beliefs. It was part of what elevated them from Apprentices. Their design seeds not only solidified their deepest desires and ambitions, but also amplified them in a way that helped them stay on track as they worked to realize their design philosophies.

Ves himself knew that his true beliefs already sounded very odd even to himself. Even if he left out the hyperbole and exaggerations he used to mislead the MTA, the thought of making mechs come alive already sounded very controversial.

Perhaps calling Gloriana crazy was like the pot calling the kettle black.

He turned around on his bed and lazily picked up Lucky.

"Who do you think is crazier, me or Gloriana?"

"Meow."

"Pff! Why me?!"

"Meow!"

"Only a crazy person would run away from a pretty woman who's totally into me? Pff!"

Ves tossed Lucky away, who halted himself in the air after engaging his flight ability.

"Meow!"

Lucky's objections fell on deaf ears as Ves blanked out. Too much had happened today and the emotional rollercoaster he had ridden left him completely put out. He really didn't want to deal with anything else today.

Sadly, duty demanded otherwise. He still needed to meet with the guest that the Rim Guardians had dumped in his lap. Keeping this mech pilot waiting for so long would doubtlessly prove detrimental to his chances of fulfilling this already impossible task.

"By their own account, this mech pilot is a coward. How can they ever expect a wimp to become an expert pilot? It simply can't be done!"

The only way to remedy this fault was to inject the mech pilot in question with a lot of courage. Yet the Rim Guardians had years to do so but completely failed.

Why?

"I bet they can probably turn the biggest coward in the galaxy into a hero as long as they brainwash the individual in question."

Naturally, using forceful methods came with their own costs. Ves even suspected the brainwashing might even hinder the advancement process.

He would meet the mech pilot in person soon enough, so there was no need for him to make any judgements before that. Hopefully, he would at least have something to work with. Every man should at least possess some pride.

After half an hour of relaxing, Ves slowly rose from his bed. The brief break allowed him to regain his composure and put Gloriana out of his mind.

Though the female mech designer still popped up in his thoughts every now and then, Ves no longer as if she had taken over his life.

"I'm a mech designer, not a love-drunk teenager. Even if she's fascinating, I'm better than this! How can I call myself a Journeyman when I constantly allow myself to get distracted?"

The difficulty was that despite all of his protests, he truly felt attracted to Gloriana. Her call earlier invigorated the desire in his heart because he realized he still had a chance with her. Her forgiving attitude towards him was so lovely that the romantic sap in him wanted to turn the Barracuda around!

"I can't do that!"

Ves vigorously shook his head. Once he became sure he scrambled all of his distractions, he stood up and left the stateroom while calling Gavin.

"Benny? Please bring our new guest to the ship's lounge. It's time for me to meet this foreigner."

"I'll bring him in right away, boss."

Once he entered the lounge, he sat down on a sofa while he waited for the arrivals. A few minutes later, the hatch slid open, revealing Gavin dragging in a skinny mech pilot.

"Here you go, boss!"

"Unhand me, you servant! I never gave you permission to touch me! You have no right to treat me as a prisoner on this rickety boat!"

Ves beheld the complaining mech pilot. Although the mech pilot's body appeared lean and fit, he bet that most of the man's fitness came from augmentations and specialized treatments.

The slight hunch in the newcomer's back and his whiny voice as he expressed his dissatisfaction firmly reinforced the notion of a pushover.

"You can go now, Benny." Ves waved his hand in dismissal.

Once Gavin left the lounge, the mech pilot stared at Ves with a frail sneer.

"You must be the illustrious owner of this tiny, cramped prison. Ves Larkinson, right? That's what your lackey called you when I asked."

"That's my name, yes."

"As a third-rater, you should stand up and pay your respects towards me. I am an esteemed scion of the Slicer Tribe! I'm fully aware that your tiny Bright Republic is too remote to know what that means, so let me explain! The Slicer Tribe is one of the foremost tribes of the Garlen Empire, a long-established second-rate state that has dominated the Vicious Mountain Star Sector for centuries!"

That caused Ves to raise his eyebrows in mild surprise. This fellow possessed a big background.

Unlike what the Garlener on the ship believed, Ves did know a thing or two about Vicious Mountain. The Garlen Empire was similar to the Friday Coalition in that it wasn't very unified for an empire. The different tribes that held sway over much of the territory of the empire frequently called the shots.

Though that sounded similar to the Vesia Kingdom, there were many differences between the two aside from their scale.

Sadly, Ves did not familiarize himself too much with the history and present attitudes of each individual tribe of the Garlen Empire. He hardly knew anything about the Slicer Tribe aside from its crude name.

"What's your name?" Ves calmly asked.

"You have the great fortune of meeting the great William Urbesh, future patriarch of the Slicer Tribe!"

"Uh huh. That sounds very impressive."

After interacting with the MTA and Gloriana, Ves no longer became impressed with citizens of second-rate states. Aside from their wealth and pomp, they were hardly different from third-raters like himself.

How could this skinny William ever succeed in intimidating Ves with his background?

Besides, this William sounded more like a blowhard than a true heir to a great power within a second-rate state. The Garlener exhibited none of the inherent class and ingrained superiority that Ves had encountered from the likes of Lord Javier or Senator Tovar!

Ves decided to burst William's bubble. "If you're so great, why did the Rim Guardians tossed you aside like discarded trash?"

That caused William to look awkward all of a sudden. The intensifying stare from Ves didn't help his composure any bit!

"Well, you see, my parents sent me to the Rim Guardians in exchange for a heavy favor and some future concessions."

"Why?"

"That's none of your business!"

"Really now?" Ves grinned in a dangerous manner. He performed some cheap spiritual tricks to make himself appear more menacing. "What if I say it is? Tell me. Why. Are. You. Here?"

William squirmed in his place. The Garlener really did not say anything, but the pressure piling up on him eventually caused him to crack.

"Alright! My Urbesh Clan isn't exactly in a great position within our greater tribe! My forefathers used to lead the Slicer Tribe for several generations, but now we've weakened to the point where my clan is on the cusp of being driven away!"

"Why is that?"

"Because I can't step up! Each clan within the tribe only holds power so long as there is at least one expert pilot or higher in charge!"

Ves recalled now that the Garlen Empire revered high-ranking mech pilots. They admired them so much that they even got to rule the entire state!

In general, a state led by mech pilots usually turned into a disaster. It was very similar to states ruled by military leaders.

The biggest difference was that states ruled by generals or admirals at least had the benefit of being ruled by highly-educated leaders. Such states at least maintained some measure of civility.

Not so for states like the Garlen Empire. Mech pilots were required to devote so much time to piloting training that they hardly ever received a rounded education. They were warriors and soldiers to the core even if they advanced to experts.

No matter if expert pilots had transcended the limits of humanity, they still retained everything they were before. Expert pilots might make for fantastic

combatants on the battlefield, but putting them in charge of the economy of a state made no sense at all!

Still, the Garlen Empire wasn't blind to these faults. In practice, while high-ranking mech pilots made all of the top-level decisions, the technocrats in the service of their clans and tribes handled all of the actual work.

In this way, the Garlen Empire managed to achieve some semblance of stability.

As Ves mused over these implications, William no longer experienced any pressure.

The mech pilot immediately took advantage of that fact.

"Are you impressed, Larkinson? I am a future leader of the great Garlen Empire! You should kneel in my presence! As long as you snivel before my feet, I might be considerate enough to invite you to serve the Urbesh Clan!"

Ves did not look amused. Now that he recalled the importance of expert pilots to the Garlen Empire, he knew that William would never be able to back up his boasts.

Why?

Because he wasn't an expert pilot! As long as William remained a mortal, he had no say in his clan, his tribe and his empire! He was a nobody!

Chapter 1285 Martial Culture

After dealing with Gloriana, Ves disliked his show of weakness. How could his spine turn so soft in front of a girl?

Ves felt the need to reassert his masculinity. How better to do that than to teach William Urbesh a lesson? The Garlaner talked big, but everyone could see that he was no true warrior. The Vandals or the Swordmaidens would have chewed him up and spit him out in a second!

"How many battles have you fought?" He asked.

The simple question took William aback. "Pardon?"

"None, right? I bet you haven't even felled a single mech."

"I resent that accusation! I have beaten plenty of mechs!"

"Have any of those instances occurred outside of simulations and practice sessions?"

William's face began to flush. "I-I-I would have you know that I am a great Urbesh clansman! We have ruled the Slicer Tribe in the past and we shall do so again under my leadership!"

Really now. From what Ves could see, William would never be able to lead a village, let alone a prominent power of a second-rate state! If William thought he stood a real chance, then the Urbesh clan must be in a dire state!

"So you think you're hot stuff, right?"

"I wouldn't call myself that, but I am proud of my skill!"

"Then come prove it to me. Right here. Right now."

"W-What do you mean by that?"

Ves patted his chest. "Come prove your strength. Don't you want me to acknowledge you? Then come show what you're made of in the only way real men communicate!"

The real meaning of his provocation dawned upon the mech pilot. While Ves still stood in a casual posture, William began to enter into a fighting posture by raising his fists, leaning forward and bending his knees.

"That's better. Now come here and throw a punch!"

"You sure? I'm a trained fighter!"

"Then you should definitely be able to beat down a mech designer like me! Come on and fight already! Stop pussyfooting around like a craven—"

"WAAAAH!"

William ran up to Ves in a swift rush. His lean body gifted him with a lot of speed that caught Ves slightly by surprise.

Yet when William's punch landed, Ves merely looked bored as William immediately cried out and shook his pained knuckle.

"You're cheating! You have armor underneath your clothes! Your ship projected an anti-grav field that blocked my fist! There is no way you should be able to withstand my genetically-enhanced strength!"

Ves lazily kicked at the whining figure, causing William to fall flat on his back!

"OUCH! Are you a cyborg or something!? There's no way you're a mech designer!"

Contempt rose up from Ves. Compared to the likes of Tristan Wesseling and Gloriana Wodin, William Urbesh was the most pathetic citizen of a second-rate state he had ever met!

"Stop making excuses. If you can't even defeat someone who designs mechs all day, how can you ever hope to lead a clan or a tribe? I know thousands of third-raters like myself who can whoop your ass, genetic enhancements or no! Even a struggling pirate from the frontier is better than you, because they at least have the guts to keep fighting instead of complaining about unfairness!"

"Don't compare me to a pirate!"

Urbesh could no longer maintain his arrogant facade. If he couldn't even defeat a single mech designer, how could he call himself a warrior?

The mech pilot looked so pathetic that Ves took pity on the fellow. "I'm not like any other mech designer. Nonetheless, even if it isn't fair, so what? Battles

are never fair. The galaxy isn't fair. Nothing is fair. If mech pilots are only able to fight when the battle is fair or in their favor, then you might as well say goodbye to your ambitions, because the only courage that's good enough to produce expert pilots is the one that dares to fight against overwhelming odds!"

"T-That's not true! There are many kinds of expert pilots!"

"How many have you actually met? Don't think I'm ignorant about expert pilots. My Larkinson Family currently boasts several expert pilots and expert candidates! We have high-ranking mech pilots in every generation leading all the way back to the founding of our home state! Can your Urbesh clan match my family's pedigree?"

William fell silent.

"The Urbesh Clan isn't in a good shape, am I correct?"

To his credit, William honestly admitted it. "My clan fell from grace in recent times. No expert pilot has emerged from our clan in two generations. Many of my relatives who tried have died or failed. The other clans don't want us to rise again, so they've deliberately cornered them into duels or lead them into accepting dangerous missions."

In a fairly plain society like the Bright Republic, personal honor played an important role among mech pilots. Mech pilots belonged to a distinct martial class that adhered to its own rules and traditions.

Yet from what Ves could recall of the Garlen Empire, the mech pilots there took it to a completely different level.

Honor played a much more important role. Battle feats and trophies served as proof as a mech pilot's valor. Those who impressed others with their battle prowess always got ahead of those who did not show off nearly as much.

Skill wasn't the only factor that determined a mech pilot's worth. The Garlaners wanted to be led by real warriors.

To Ves, the way the Garlen leaders constantly tried to outdo each other led to lots of violence. The Garlen Empire had gained a reputation for being highly militaristic and aggressive. They constantly threatened the other states of the Vicious Mountain Star Sector with the antics of their leaders whenever they felt the need to prove their worth.

A state led by mech pilots meant that it was actually led by the impulses of mech pilots. The state only existed to sustain a robust war industry and to provide an endless supply of cannon fodder to bolster the armies of the aggressive Garlen clans and tribes.

Ves had no idea how a pushover like William Urbesh emerged from such a militaristic state.

In fact, he knew almost nothing about the fellow at all. If Ves wanted to tackle his latest assignment seriously, then he should really study up on William's background and circumstances.

For now, Ves got what he wanted from the mech pilot. He no longer felt as small and weak as he did when he faced Gloriana.

"Alright, for now I'll pack you off to my cousin Melkor Larkinson so he can see what you're made of. Let me call him so that he can send a shuttle to pick you up."

He had no desire to hold William's hand all the time. The way Ves saw it, the Rim Guardians only cared about helping him become an expert candidate. The exact method didn't matter as long as the result was there.

Though William was in no way expert pilot material, nothing was impossible. With all the knowledge that Ves accrued, he knew exactly what was needed to push a mech pilot through the extraordinary threshold.

In fact, now that he thought about it, wasn't William the ideal guinea pig that he asked for? While the Urbesh clansman wasn't as good as a dwarf because Ves still needed to care for his life, at least he could try all sorts of experiments without risking the wellbeing of anyone he truly about!

An ominous glint shone in his eyes, causing William to shudder. Why did he feel like he was a mech about to be disassembled by an enthusiastic mech designer?

"Don't you worry, William. Us Larkinsons will take very good care of you, hehe." Ves grinned.

He sent a few messages to arrange the transfer. The Greenfeather reacted quickly, dispatching a shuttle to the Barracuda. Once Ves escorted William off the corvette, he turned back to his stateroom and called for Gavin.

"You called, boss?"

"I'm sure you looked up our new guest, Benny. What did you find?"

"Well, it's a doozy. I had to read up on the Garlen Empire and how the different tribes and clans are run before I figured out the context of William's circumstances. The first thing you should know is that the tribes of the Empire are similar to the partners of the Friday Coalition. They rule over vast swathes of space and possess a lot of autonomy."

Ves nodded in understanding. "I kind of figured that out already."

"Each tribe gets to be run by a patriarch who emerged from the strongest clan within their ranks. They are almost always ace pilots, but expert pilots will do if no aces have emerged. Sometimes, experts and aces come into prominence from tribesmen that don't belong to one of the premier clans, but they frequently ally themselves to one in order to climb higher."

Ace pilots were extremely rare. So much so that the Bright Republic only had a handful of them while the Friday Coalition was only marginally better off!

"Vicious Mountain is known as a brutal star sector. Its name is certainly apt." Gavin noted. "Part of why the star sector is embroiled in so much conflict is due to the existence of the Garlen Empire. Its martial culture has bled over into other states. It didn't help that states that focused more on peace over war tended to get overrun by their more warlike neighbors. Vicious Mountain is one of the most savage star sectors in our star region!"

"The star sector may be savage, but that does not mean they are primitive." Ves cautioned. "I know it's easy to look down on them because they act no differently from ancient tribes, but there is more to the Garlen Empire and the other states than their martial-oriented society."

Gavin shrugged. "Sure. There are plenty of civilians in the Empire who never experienced the cruelty of war. But the tribes make sure to indoctrinate them into volunteering for every new conflict they provoke."

"So everyone just goes along with the whims of their warmongering leaders." Ves commented.

He knew the power of indoctrination. Anyone could believe in anything as long as their surroundings reinforced the values they were meant to absorb.

"The Urbesh Clan is not in a very good state right now." Gavin continued. "A few generations ago, they lost most of their high-ranking mech pilots after a disastrous campaign. The ones that are left were barely able to keep the clan in existence. The Urbeshes had to concede most of their territory and their assets because they couldn't fend off the challenges from the rival clans within the tribe."

"Since the Urbeshes are so weak, why haven't they been eliminated?"

"The Garlen Empire isn't as bad as the Vesia Kingdom in that regard, boss. There are tons of rules and traditions the Garleners have to abide by. The restrictions they're subjected to make sure that the infighting doesn't devolve into outright slaughter. That would only weaken the tribes and the Empire in the long run, making them vulnerable to outside invasion."

"That makes a lot of sense. So the Urbesh Clan doesn't have any expert pilots, right?"

"No. The ones that remained after the disastrous campaign were already past their prime, and the last one died fairly recently. Currently, the Urbesh Clan is able to field only a hundred or so mech pilots and is one step away from dissolution. No matter how many regular mech pilots they've raised, a clan doesn't have the right to exist if they aren't capable of producing an expert pilot."

It was a sad decline to a once-illustrious clan. Ves found it a little odd that despite being able to field so many mech pilots, none of them had ever succeeded in breaking through to expert candidate or expert pilot.

For a clan with such a glorious history, wasn't that a bit too unnatural? From what he learned so far, the Urbeshes should be just as martial-focused as the Larkinsons!

Chapter 1286 Frontier Star Sector

The Komodo Star Sector sat adjacent to the Majestic Teal and Vicious Mountain Star Sectors.

Of the three, the Komodo Star Sector was the youngest among them. Not only that, but it was also designated as a frontier star sector by the Big Two.

A frontier star sector only possessed some of the attributes of a proper star sector. Its borders were fairly porous because the Big Two hadn't come

around to plug most of the gaps in higher-dimensional space yet. Its developmental level and investment were fairly low as well.

In turn, frontier star sectors also enjoyed some special rights. The Big Two would not allow Majestic Teal and Vicious Mountain to bully their weaker neighbor. Though conflicts between them still occurred, they did not match the scale of conflicts between older and more developed star sectors.

According to several clues and estimates, it would take a century or two for the Komodo Star Sector to be upgraded to the next tier by the Big Two. Not only would it be designated as a developing star sector, but it would also acquire a proper two-word name.

One of the most favorite pastimes of the people who lived in the star sector was to come up with the most fitting name to describe their home.

Snarling Komodo, Deadly Komodo, Gratuitous Komodo, Naked Komodo, Screaming Komodo, the list went on and on. Ves didn't know who got to decide how the star sector would be called in the future, but he hoped the fellow would at least have some sense and pick a name that exuded class.

In this regard, Majestic Teal and Vicious Mountain were polar opposites in this regard. Whereas the former emphasized civilization, the latter revelled in its barbarism!

Vicious Mountain particularly aroused a bit of dread from the Komodo Star Sector. Their constant warring sometimes spilled over into the neighboring star sectors.

Yet for all of their senseless fighting and killing, the natives of Vicious Mountain attracted admiration from all around! In the Age of Mechs, nothing excited the people more than hearing tales of heroic mech pilots, many of whom originated from the mighty Garlen Empire.

In such a strong and cruel environment where mech pilots constantly forced each other to prove themselves or be eliminated or relegated to a lesser position, how could the Urbesh Clan raise someone as brittle as William?

This was the great mystery which Ves wanted an answer for. How come William spent his time in a boring place like the Komodo Star Sector?

"It turns out that William's parents were exiled to our star sector." Gavin revealed to Ves. "I can't find the reason why, but whatever they did was bad enough that the Urbesh Clan wanted the two to leave Vicious Mountain entirely."

"It could be that the Urbesh Clan exiled the parents for their own protection." Ves noted.

"That is a possibility. Sadly, dirty laundry like that can't be found on the galactic net. All I know is that William was actually born and raised in the Reinald Republic. He never once stepped foot in the Vicious Mountain Star Sector."

"Ah. That explains why he's so spineless."

Sure enough. Only a degenerate, materialistic state like the Reinald Republic could raise such a weak mech pilot.

Gavin noted another important detail. "Despite the fact that his parents were severely punished, they used to enjoy a high status within the clan. They're descended from expert pilots and patriarchs. Since William isn't guilty of the crimes of his parents and the Urbeshes aren't in the habit of forcing the younger generation to bear the sins of the older generation, technically he should be one of their premier scions."

"How impressive." Ves flatly remarked. "He isn't even accompanied by a single retainer or bodyguard. The Urbesh Clan must value him very highly."

"The Urbesh Clan is kind of falling apart." Gavin shrugged.

"Have you found out why the Rim Guardians have taken William under their wing for a time?"

"I really don't know. That's not the sort of information I can find from public sources. You'll have to ask him yourself, boss. It could be that the Urbesh Clan or his parents paid a very high price and promised even more to shape William up. It could be that the MTA doesn't like the clans that are on the rise in the Slicer Tribe. Maybe the Urbeshes used to be solid allies of the Rim Guardians."

Those were reasonable guesses. Ves did not consider the Rim Guardians to be a charitable organization, but neither did they have a strong reason to invest a lot in William.

There must be more behind the Garlaner. Ves was sure of it. "As far as I know, the Rim Guardians entrusted us with William for three years. During that time, we not only have to keep him alive, but we also have to do our best to turn him into an expert candidate."

That caused Gavin to look very critical. "If you ask me, the Rim Guardians are setting you up for an impossible mission. Expert pilots are already rare as it is. Even if the blood of expert pilots run in William's veins, that doesn't mean he has what it takes. If all the training programs the Rim Guardians put him through haven't shaped him up yet, then how can we do any better?"

"I'm not sure whether the Rim Guardians did their utmost to push William to his limits. He looks far too soft to suffer any real hardship." Ves noted. "The way they eagerly passed him on to me suggests that they consider him to be a useless burden, but were somehow forced to put up with him for other reasons."

"So what does that mean for us, boss?"

Ves shrugged. "I think the real focus of the Rim Guardians is not on William, but rather us, or me specifically. The Larkinsons have a very distinguished track record when it comes to raising expert pilots. At least we're better than the current Urbesh Clan in this regard. My design philosophy has also attracted some suspicion, I bet. Perhaps some within the MTA believe that my pilot-focused design philosophy is able to turn a turd into gold."

What would it mean if Ves returned to Centerpoint a few years later with a completely different William? How would the Rim Guardians react when the William they used to know turned from a craven poser into a valiant expert candidate?

It would definitely attract an uncomfortable degree of attention to Ves! Even if he made himself out like a lunatic to the MTA, the organization was clearly able to look past his supposed irrationality! After all, they even extended some favors to Gloriana!

Now that he thought about it, it would be rather counterproductive if Ves somehow succeeded in turning William into an extraordinary. Even if William only got a single foot in the door by becoming an expert candidate, the Rim Guardians and the rest of the MTA would definitely put him under greater scrutiny!

That was not what Ves wished to see!

While Ves saw a lot of advantages in growing closer to the Rim Guardians, it wasn't as if he needed it right now. With how unexceptional William was like, the fraternity shouldn't begrudge Ves too much if he failed to complete this impossible assignment.

That didn't mean he could neglect William entirely. If the Rim Guardian found out that Ves did nothing at all, then Ves would probably not enjoy their reaction!

To that end, he decided to make a half-hearted effort. It would be fine if he messed around a bit by handing William over to the Larkinsons or subject him to some dubious experiments.

As long as Ves appeared to be making an earnest effort, the Rim Guardians shouldn't have any objections.

After dismissing Gavin, Ves called Melkor and passed on what he learned.

"So our guest hasn't grown up in Vicious Mountain?" Melkor questioned. "That changes things."

"For all intents and purposes, he's no different from a Reinaldan. He may talk big, but so do all Reinaldians."

"Understood. How do you wish us to treat him, Ves? From what you just told me, he's been through several training programs but achieved little result."

"Well, the most important aspect that needs to change is his lack of spine. As long as we can stiffen him up, he at least has a minute chance of becoming an expert pilot. Right now, I don't see he has any way to achieve a breakthrough. His mentality is too weak."

Melkor rubbed his chin. "First, we'll have to know what he's capable of. We'll have to test his genetic aptitude, his specialization, his skills, his combat experience and more in order to draw up a training program. I'll probably have to ask some of our uncles and aunts for advice, is that okay?"

"Sure." Ves waved dismissively. "They'll surely have a lot to teach us. Try out their methods and see if William can catch on. If none of them work as well as we hoped, we can always resort to other solutions later on. Just make sure you are working on firming up his courage. We'll definitely have to address that problem first."

This was probably the hardest problem to solve. Ves hoped that Melkor could somehow manage to transform William into someone who was actually useful. If not, Ves did not mind tossing William to Ketis or stepping in himself.

Ves addressed another topic that had come up in his mind recently. "One other thing, Melkor. I'll likely be spending some time in the Friday Coalition for the foreseeable time. So long as I'm in Coalition space, the protection of the Avatars of Myth isn't very useful to me. It might even be detrimental."

"I.. agree. As great as our mechs perform in a place like the Bright Republic, they're not on par to the mechs that are commonly used in the Coalition. We'd be laughed at best by the locals. Our presence will not be able to bestow you with any prestige."

The admission did not come lightly. Melkor obviously incurred a blow to his pride by speaking out the painful truth.

"Don't take it too seriously, Melkor. It should be me who is to blame. The Avatars of Myth is a mech force that is only meant to operate in the Bright Republic and similar states. We don't have the money or foundation to incorporate second-class mechs to its roster."

"At least you have an existing arrangement with SASS. If you are in need of bodyguards in Coalition space, you might be able to solicit their services."

"I'll keep that suggestion in mind." Ves said, though he didn't plan to do so unless absolutely necessary.

It cost way too much money to hire them! He'd have to beg Master Olsen to pay in his stead!

"How long will you be gone from home?"

"I don't know. It depends on what Master Olson wants from me and what I'm allowed to choose. I'll try my best not to stay away for more than a year."

Melkor nodded. "Inform us once you know."

After a brief chat where Ves made some other arrangements, he ended the call. For now, both the Barracuda and the Greenfeather would jump to a border system of the Friday Coalition.

Once there, they would split ways. The Barracuda would move on to Leemar while the Greenfeather made her way back to the Bright Republic, carrying Melkor, the Avatars he brought with them, and William Urbesh.

This basically left him with only Lucky and Gavin as his companions.

"Well, it's best not to bring too many people when I'm in the Friday Coalition." He muttered. "The locals aren't too fond of seeing too many rats at a time."

Novices and Apprentices from lesser states were treated like dirt in the Friday Coalition, but Ves no longer counted among them.

Ever since he became a Journeyman and a galactic citizen, Ves ought to receive better treatment from the Coalition.

"Let's see what opportunities I can find."

Chapter 1287 Exiting the Maze

The Barracuda and the Greenfeather finally departed from the busy Centerpoint System. Once they transitioned into a Coalition star system, the Barracuda went on to jump to the interior of Coalition space.

"It will take a couple of weeks to arrive at Leemar, sir." Captain Silvestra reported. "According to the navigational data we've obtained, our vessel has to pass through some adverse tides to reach our destination. That will delay our journey by a couple of days."

"It's okay. As I've said before, we aren't on a strict time limit. Just make sure we reach our destination safe and sound." Ves said dismissively.

"That shouldn't be any problem. The Barracuda is a Leemar-built space yacht, so it is more than capable of traversing the Friday Coalition's distinctive higher-dimensional turbulence."

"Oh? Is there a difference?"

The captain nodded. "Star systems that are richer in exotics or features more active energy levels such as larger suns are more difficult to travel around. The surrounding regions of higher-dimensional space can sometimes be as calm and mild as in the Bright Republic, but it could also erupt into a storm."

"Does that mean that the Greenfeather would have been under threat if she continued travelling alongside the Barracuda?"

"Not unless a freak accident occurs. She's a modern light carrier, so her FTL drive is still close to optimal. It's the older ships that have seen a couple of decades of constant use that are in danger. When they're fifty years or older, their FTL drives are seriously degraded. Their tolerance to adverse situations won't be as good as before. This problem is much more pronounced with cheaper ships than a Coalition-standard vessel like the Barracuda."

In short, cheap and old starships really shouldn't have any business entering Coalition space. The Friday Coalition occupied a large chunk of the most desirable star systems in the star sector. Most of those systems were filled with exotics which exerted a noticeable influence on their surroundings.

"What's the lifespan of an average starship?" Ves curiously asked.

"Depends. There's no simple answer to this question, sir. It's probably the same with mechs. Good design, sound production, diligent maintenance and prudent use will massively prolong the effective lifespan of a starship. Naturally, even if proper spacers judge that a starship has reached the end of her lifespan, others might not agree."

Ves understood. "Never underestimate humanity's urge to take shortcuts or pick up a bargain despite the risks."

He had seen a lot of forces make use of second-hand or even third-hand starships. Converted carriers, the most often-used mech transport in the galaxy, were almost always adapted from decommissioned cargo haulers and the like.

Mechs were expensive. Ships were expensive. Many outfits could only afford to invest the bulk of their wealth in one, leaving them with very thin purses by the time they addressed the other.

The ramshackle rust buckets employed by impoverished mercenary corps and bottom feeder pirate gangs may fare okay in the frontier or in the outer region of a star sector. While these vessels possessed many faults, their aging FTL drives were unlikely to encounter any dangerous situations during FTL travel.

"How long do you think the Barracuda can last?"

"Easily a century as long as she won't get shot at during this time." The captain replied. "You'll probably upgrade to a better ship by then. With how fast you've shot up, I'm sure you'll be able to afford a grand yacht or something better in a couple of decades."

Ves could very well imagine such a possibility. "Your crew won't be around forever, right?"

She smiled. "All of us want to settle down eventually. While I love my job, I don't see myself as a spaceborn. I don't want my children to grow up entirely in space either. Still, we might serve aboard your ships for a certain duration or work from offices of the Avatars of Myth."

Every employee working for Ves was also a human. They had lives outside of their jobs. Ves would be a very poor boss if he neglected that most of them wished to enjoy a family life as well.

"Are your replacements already in place?"

Silvestra shook her head. "Fleet Commander Rofane, who is pretty irate at you for neglecting to meet with him by the way, has already started to address that matter. He's implementing a rotation of spacers and crew to staff your growing collection of space vessels."

Ah. Ves did neglect to meet with the fleet commander, but strictly speaking he already reported to Melkor. There was no need for Ves to meet with every recent hire in person.

In any case, it sounded as if the fleet commander was already doing good work.

After letting the captain return to her work, Ves retreated to his stateroom.

Days passed by as the Barracuda swiftly traversed through Coalition space. Ves turned back to busying himself by puzzling with the Skull Architect's designs.

He already completed a variant of the Caskar Pike and achieved significant progress in doing the same for the Toroz Ruby and the Jinven. The spaceborn striker and aerial marksman designs both offered useful insights to Ves, mainly because he never designed these archetypes before.

The Toroz Ruby attracted his interest the most. "Most light mechs are hell to fight against up close due to their high mobility. Their opponents will have to deploy light mechs as well or resort to striker mechs."

While the definition of striker mechs weren't quite fixed, they were mostly heavier and tougher than light mechs and possessed superior wide-area armament such as flamethrowers. They were most often used to defend against light mech raids, but they performed decently in a couple of other roles as well.

The Skull Architect opted to pair two weapon systems in his spaceborn take on a striker mech. The Toroz Ruby's primary armament consisted of a ballistic shotgun with a fairly narrow shot pattern.

It needed to be narrow because many battles between two different mech forces in space often turned into tangled clumps where friend and foe intermingled with each other.

If the shotgun sprayed pellets or other projectiles all over the space, they might be liable to hit their allies!

For this reason, the shotgun wielded by the striker mech was particularly suited to take out incoming light mechs from medium range.

However, that did not leave the striker mech with a lot of options if a light mech snuck up into close range.

The Skull Architect chose to address this problem by adding a second weapon system. From what Ves learned about second-class mechs, this ought to be his typical response to these kinds of problems.

"A mech designer from a third-rate state would accept this shortcoming, while a mech designer from a second-rate state would seek to add something that can mitigate it instead."

The problem was that the Skull Architect applied second-rate solutions to a third-rate mech. The result was that his Toroz Ruby possessed a very busy internal architecture due to the addition of integrated heat beams mounts to the striker mech's shoulders.

Though the heat beams were very useful in fending off light mechs by heating them up to dangerous levels when they came closer, they also consumed an enormous amount of power.

Depending on how often a Toroz Ruby had to resort to the heat beams, the effective uptime of the striker mech might be as short as half an hour!

"The Toroz Ruby's flight system is also a bit of a power hog!"

The striker mech needed to possess at least some of the mobility to keep up with all the light mechs flitting about. Although the design wasn't expected to outrace a light mech outright, it should at least be a challenge to bypass.

All in all, the Skull Architect's design choices turned the Toroz Ruby into a very difficult mech to maintain and pilot.

"It's the same with the Caesar Augustus and the Marc Antony. Hybrid mechs are inherently more complicated to work with. Their complexity is well above average." He muttered.

It didn't help that the Skull Architect placed fairly high expectations on its mech pilots, nevermind that most of his customers consisted of badly-trained pirates nowadays.

While Ves could tell that the Skull Architect made some concessions, the vast majority of the Toroz Ruby's design focused way too much on drawing out the maximum possible performance.

Something came up while he worked on his variant of the striker mech.

"Now that I think about it, his design philosophy shares some resemblance to that of Gloriana. Is that why both of them are so extreme?"

His guess made a lot of sense to him. Both mech designers may differ in rank and origin, but their design philosophies both pursued ideals associated with achieving the best possible result.

"The best mech design doesn't exist." Ves shook his head. "Both of them are facing an uphill battle if they seek to realize their design philosophies."

Perhaps that was why mech designers who pursued the best tended to be so radical. They were far more desperate than other mech designers to find a way out of a maze that didn't possess an exit.

Gloriana must be aware of this problem, so sought to obtain a solution early.

"The solution she came up with is borrowing the strength of another mech designer to overcome her problem."

When different mech designers with compatible design philosophies combined their strengths, a result that surpassed the sum of two parts might emerge. Such a qualitative transformation would reveal a lot of aspects about their design philosophies that they didn't know.

Studying the result and figuring out why their design philosophies achieved better results than by themselves should be one of the proven ways to figure out a future direction.

"No wonder mech designers collaborate so often. It's not just to incorporate another mech designer's strength into a design, but also serves as both an experiment and learning opportunity."

Because both Gloriana and the Skull Architect appeared to have adopted Class I design philosophies, they should have a lot of difficulty finding synergistic collaborators. Both of them tried to improve a broad swathe of aspects, which posed a lot of hindrances to many other design philosophies.

"Each of them are desperate for a mech designer who help them exit the maze."

Equating the two made Ves a bit worried. He realized that the same reasons that made Gloriana so obsessed about him also applied to the Skull Architect!

Imagining the Skull Architect inviting Ves to a 'meeting' during a candlelight dinner only to return to a shared hotel room later in the night...

"BLEH!" Ves erupted, startling Lucky who lazily hovered above his head.
"That's disgusting!"

Even though this nightmare was so ridiculous that it would never come to pass, Ves nonetheless believed there was a kernel of truth.

The Skull Architect would definitely benefit as much from collaborating with Ves as Gloriana!

If his guess was right, then Ves might not only have to contend with one stalker!

"Goddammit!"

Still, once he calmed down, Ves did not think it was all that bad. The Skull Architect might be crazy, but he was also a force to be reckoned with in the frontier. Developing a cordial or even a friendly business relationship with him should prove very helpful down the line.

"I'll still be playing with fire, though."

The risks needed to be worth it. The man was so unstable that being his friend might not mean anything, but becoming his enemy would definitely lead to awful consequences!

He decided to push the matter aside and focus on finishing his variant for the Toroz Ruby.

In general, Ves did not mess around too much to develop his variant. He decided not to do anything too exciting but merely tuned down some of its excessive performance while instilling it with a weak image.

"That should be enough to keep the fellow happy." He muttered.

Chapter 1288 Feeling Inadequate

The quiet journey to Leemar not only allowed Ves to do his homework, but also take care of other matters.

For example, Ves finally judged the Barracuda traveled far enough from Centerpoint to check up on the System. Under Lucky's vigilant ECM shielding, he summoned his System comm from his Inventory and activated his Privacy Shield.

While he did not have total confidence that these countermeasures would be able to jam state-of-the-art MTA surveillance technology, the Friday Coalition was an entirely different matter. He also activated it during FTL travel, so it was extremely unlikely for their spies to be snooping in on him right now.

"It's been a while."

Though the System gave him numerous advantages, he did not wish to become too dependent on it. So far, he figured he did a good job of that, though it left him to abandon many opportunities that he could have pursued earlier.

Ever since he met Gloriana, he somehow felt lacking. Ves found himself unable to resist her forwardness and constantly ceded the initiative to her whenever she took charge.

"It's probably her Hexer background in combination with her current success. Even with her privileged upbringing, she has achieved a lot for a mech designer."

And she did all of that without something similar to the System. Ves couldn't help but admire her deep down in his mind.

Thinking about her and how weak-kneed he acted in her presence still sent him into an ambivalent mood.

A part of him wanted to be more impressive. He previously thought he was doing quite well enough as a mech designer, so he did not feel much pressure to forcibly upgrade his design abilities.

Yet after meeting Gloriana, the urge to improve himself reasserted with a vengeance. How could he ever take the initiative when he always felt inadequate in front of a fellow peer?

"If I don't feel confident enough, I'll just have to improve myself to the point where I can hold my ground when I meet her again!"

Still, another part of Ves wanted nothing to do with Gloriana. He had seen how extreme fanatics could become in order to obtain what they wanted. Falling deeper into her clutches both pleased him and repelled him at the same time!

"What is wrong with me?!" Ves violently shook his head.

If not for her fanaticism, Ves would have wholeheartedly pursued her. She ticked all the right boxes. In her own words, they made for a perfect couple. Yet the way she let herself be controlled by her obsessiveness and compulsions sometimes freaked him out.

"Well, it's not like I'm much better."

The big question that haunted him recently was whether Ves should accept Gloriana's affections or close himself off to her entirely.

"I don't think she'll like it if I ignore her." Ves grimaced. "All manner of bad things might happen if I scorn such a driven woman."

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, particularly one so capable as Gloriana!

On the other hand, accepting her would not only allow Ves to avoid that unpleasantness, but also enjoy the company of someone he genuinely found attractive and complimented him very well on a professional level.

An important question popped up whenever Ves seriously contemplated growing closer to the Hexer.

"Can I trust her?"

Strangely enough, his intuition was strongly in favor of trusting Gloriana. The woman might have a few screws loose in her head, but her abnormal dedication towards him was definitely genuine!

"The main reason why all those faiths and rebel movements cultivate fanaticism and blind devotion is because it's the strongest way to ensure loyalty!"

A fanatic was another word for an unflinching loyalist to a certain cause. It simply wasn't possible to bribe or coerce fanatics to betray their cause.

They were so loyal that most manipulation and interrogation techniques would fail when applied to them. The only way to get them to talk was to employ very harsh or advanced methods, but this usually killed or permanently disabled the fanatic in question.

Although Ves felt a little uncomfortable about it, he did not feel so uncomfortable if he shared some of his secrets with her if their relationship grew deeper.

"It will take a long time before I get to this point. There's little use contemplating it now."

He turned his attention back to the System.

[Design Evaluation: Transcendent Messenger]

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that."

Ves merely skimmed it over before dismissing it. The evaluation didn't tell him anything new. Perhaps the only criteria worth paying attention to was its X-Factor.

X-Factor: A-

"A- huh? That's a little worse than the Aurora Titan, but not out of my expectations."

Any mech design with an A-grade X-Factor was already remarkable. Their only fault was that they were very troublesome to achieve.

He shrugged off the evaluation report and moved on to his Status.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Journeyman Mech Designer

Specializations: Spiritual Man-Machine Symbiosis

Design Points: 276,167

Attributes

Strength: 1.4

Dexterity: 1.0

Endurance: 2.0

Intelligence: 2.2

Creativity: 2.1

Concentration: 2.1

Spirituality: 1.4

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

[Assembly]: Journeyman - [3D Printer Proficiency IV] - [Assembler Proficiency IV]

[Battle Mechatronics]: Apprentice - [Knight Mech Mastery I] - [Rifleman Mech Mastery I] - [Space Knight Mastery I] - [Hero Mech Mastery I]

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Apprentice - [Mech Hacking II]

[Electrical Engineering]: Journeyman - [Structural Pathway Configuration IV] - [Energy Storage IV] - [Conductors III] - [Ultracompact Energy Storage I]

[Materials Science]: Journeyman - [Crystallography III] - [Crystal Laser Propagation II] - [Lithic Materials I]

[Mathematics]: Journeyman

[Mechanics]: Journeyman - [Jury Rigging IV] - [Speed Tuning IV]

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression III]

[Metaphysics]: Apprentice - [X-Factor IV] - [Spiritual Senses II] - [Spiritual Exploration I] - [Spiritual Projection I] - [Spiritual Empowerment I] - [Spiritual Imprint Manipulation I] - [Spiritual Masking I]

[Interfacing]: Novice

[Physics]: Senior - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization III] - [Gamma Laser Weapons I] - [Lightweight Armor Optimization II] - [Mediumweight Armor Optimization IV] - [Melee Weapon Optimization IV] - [Polarizing Shielding II] - [Rapid-Fire Laser Weapon Operation II] - [Optics III]

[Propulsion]: Journeyman - [Flight Systems IV]

[Salvaging]: Apprentice - [Field Repairs III]

[Signals and Communications]: Journeyman - [Anti-Stealth Detection II]

[Stealth and Cloaking]: Novice

Abilities

[Superpublish]: Available. Can be activated once a year.

[Inventorize]: Unavailable.

Evaluation: A young Journeyman Mech Designer at the start of developing his unique design philosophy.

"That's odd. My Spirituality increased by 0.1." Ves noted with curiosity.

Aside from this peculiar growth, nothing else of significance had changed. His DP growth was quite respectable. It signified that his company was making very brisk sales.

In particular, the Aurora Titan had attracted a cult following according to Gavin. NORA Consolidated expected sales to slump after it had fulfilled the initial orders, but customers from other states began to appreciate the super-medium space knight.

Outfits learned that the Aurora Titan had a very good effect on morale. While its application was very narrow and inflexible, its presence alone always succeeded in boosting the morale of every friendly.

Not only that, but the Aurora Titan's intimidating aura seriously oppressed any raiders attempting to assault a trade convoy.

Whether this was worth paying 100 million bright credits or more depended on the customer. Most outfits simply couldn't justify the expenditure, but there were always a few outfits in every state that saw the true value of fielding a unique and inspiring mech like the Aurora Titan!

For this reason, Ves expected his DP earnings to continue to grow steadily for the foreseeable future.

"In fact, the DP I've accumulated doesn't reflect the full earnings the LMC has made."

One notable source of income to a mech company was the licensing of its mech designs. The Aurora Titan design was a public mech design that came under an increasing amount of attention.

Many mech designers became very interested in figuring out the secrets behind the remarkable design. They licensed the design in order to obtain the full design schematics and additional documentation so that they might be able to explore it and design a superior mech.

Many of these mech designers usually consisted of greedy Apprentices who were jealous at the LMC's bountiful product margins. What was the difficulty of designing a variant of the Aurora Titan and undercutting the original model by pricing their works a little cheaper?

They mostly failed.

Any mech designer that muddled up the original design with their own additions only spoiled its X-Factor. Without exception, every single variant lost much of the intrinsic value that only someone like Ves would add to his mech design!

Journeyman and Seniors knew better. They probably figured out that the unique strength that Ves bestowed on his mech designs was actually a Class IX design philosophy.

While most mech designers could learn a thing or two from other people's design philosophy, Class IX design philosophies were different.

They were too weird! Therefore, while a couple of Journeyman and Seniors had indeed licenced the Aurora Titan, they did not have any illusions of copying the original designer's trade secrets.

"In fact, I don't even know why they licensed the Aurora Titan design if they don't intend to publish a variant. Are they doing it for research purposes?" Ves scratched his head.

Well, in any case, the LMC was raking in a lot of fees. Each time a mech designer applied for a standard 10-year license, they forked out 6 billion bright credits!

Even if NORA Consolidated pocketed seventy-five percent of that sum, leaving the LMC with only 1.5 billion credits, the dozens of licenses issued in the last couple of months really added a lot of money to the company's coffers.

"Well, the shareholders are probably the happiest. The LMC won't skimp out on dividends this year."

Ves turned his attention back to his Status and evaluated what he should improve. He mainly wanted to gain some confidence, and what better than to pad his Skills?

"Upgrading my Sub-Skills won't have that much effect." Ves shook his head.

He wanted a comprehensive upgrade. For this reason, he decided to upgrade his main Skills. Now that he became Journeyman, the sheer influx of knowledge shouldn't strain his mind as much.

He was also much more equipped to fulfill the Upgrade Missions the Systems decided to send on his way.

[Dexterity Attribute Candy]: 1,000 DP

[Dexterity Attribute Candy]: 1,100 DP

[Dexterity Attribute Candy]: 1,200 DP

[Dexterity Attribute Candy]: 1,300 DP

[Dexterity Attribute Candy]: 1,400 DP

[Dexterity Attribute Candy]: 1,500 DP

[Strength Attribute Candy]: 1,400 DP

[Strength Attribute Candy]: 1,500 DP

[Mechanical Fault Detection I]: 10,000 DP

[Fixed Armor Specialization I]: 10,000 DP

[Flexible Armor Specialization I]: 10,000 DP

[Mechanics - Senior]: 100,000 DP

[Metallurgy - Senior]: 100,000 DP

Before he upgraded his Mechanics and Metallurgy Skills, he decided to upgrade his physical attributes first. While it was tempting to upgrade his Strength and Dexterity straight to 2.0, Ves was wary of changing his body too drastically. Past experience suggested that huge leaps in improvement led to a lot of unforeseen side effects!

"Upgrading both of my lowest physical attributes to 1.6 should be sufficient."

Ves was right to be careful. As soon as he swallowed all the attribute candies, his body felt increasingly more uncomfortable to him. While he didn't feel any pain, his loss of coordination was quite serious!

It was as if he had just undergone a major gene optimization treatment. If not for his lingering familiarity with his body, Ves might not be able to control his body at all for a couple of weeks!

"As it is, I'm barely able to stand and walk!"

Nonetheless, the benefits should be more than worth it. As long as he got used to his new changes, Ves would see numerous benefits in his life. Beating up mech designers and mech pilots out of their mechs in order to assert his dominance would become trivially easy.

Just the thought of doing so in front of an impressed-looking Gloriana made him want to thump his chest!

"Urgh! I'm doing it for myself, not for Gloriana!"

Ves quickly shook his head and proceeded to upgrade his Skills.

Because both Mechanics and Metallurgy did not meet the System's prerequisites concerning Sub-Skills, Ves decided to add in three useful-sounding Sub-Skills. Each of them helped him detect and mitigate flaws in his designs that he would have otherwise overlooked.

"It will save me the trouble of discovering the flaws during tests."

After that, he finally pulled the trigger and upgraded his two Journeyman-level Skills.

As expected, the System presented him with two Upgrade Missions.

Chapter 1289 Major Weakness

[Upgrade Mission - Mechanics]

Mission: Design and Fabricate a bestial mech

Difficulty: C-Rank

Prerequisites: [Mechanics - Journeyman]

Description

Humanoid mechs are the predominant standard shape of mechs. Yet they are not the only option available. Humanoid mechs carry distinct strengths and weaknesses. Certain roles are best filled by bestial mechs which adopt shapes that do not conform to the human body.

Study the use and application of bestial mechs without aid and design a classical bestial mech that meets the Mech Designer System's standards. Then fabricate it and sell it to a worthy customer.

Reward:

[Mechanics - Senior]

[Upgrade Mission - Metallurgy]

Mission: Design and Fabricate a smart metal mech

Difficulty: C-Rank

Prerequisites: [Mechanics - Metallurgy]

Description

Mechs are ordinarily plated by fixed, inflexible alloys. This is not the only solution available. Smart metals have been developed that consists of nanomachines or other micro-level substances that can add a certain degree of flexibility to the usage of a mech.

Study the use and applications of smart metal without aid and employ them into a viable mech design that meets the Mech Designer System's standards. Then fabricate it and sell it to a worthy customer.

Reward:

[Metallurgy - Senior]

"Wow. This is.. well, not easy, but quite doable!"

Ves felt a small amount of relief that the System did not put him in a difficult spot this time. When he wanted to upgrade his Physics Skill to Senior-level, the System forced him to develop a gamma laser rifle.

He expected the System to try and screw him over by violating another major taboo or two, but it seems he finally caught a break for once.

"It wouldn't have been necessary anyway." Ves muttered.

He used to revere and respect the Big Two. No longer. The tenets of the MTA were worth as much as a spoiled nutrient pack to him. He wouldn't hesitate if the System commanded him to design a mech that turned the very ground it walked upon into a toxic sludge pool!

As Ves contemplated the nature of his two upgrade missions, he realized two important points.

First, the upgrade missions compelled him to learn more about bestial mechs and smart metal through his own efforts. He wasn't able to gain the required knowledge by acquiring the relevant Sub-Skills in the Skill Tree.

"With my learning speed, it won't take much effort for me to get up to speed." He muttered.

Second, instead of designing two separate mechs to fulfill each mission in sequence, why not try to fulfill both of their demands with just a single mech?

"There's nothing there that says I can't hit two birds with one stone."

A bestial mech with an exterior that consisted of smart metal was not too unusual. Ves could save a lot of time and effort if he opted to design such a machine.

"The sooner I upgrade my main Skills, the more confident I'll be the next time I meet Gloriana!"

This time would definitely come! With how big of a crush she developed towards him, there was no way she could accept being separated from him for so long!

"I can't let her run over me again like last time! How can I call myself a man when Gloriana thinks she should protect me? I'm not a baby!"

Lucky, who lounged in the vicinity, raised his head at Ves. "Meow."

"Pff! You're wrong! I don't have a weakness against strong women!"

"Meow meow!"

"My mother, Master Olson, Calabast and Gloriana are just exceptions! The only reason I'm weak in front of them is because of other factors!"

"Meooooow!"

"I DO NOT HAVE A FETISH FOR STRONG WOMEN BECAUSE MY MOTHER DIED EARLY!"

Ves firmly turned around didn't pay any further attention to the nonsense uttered by his pet.

He instead returned to work. He decided to set aside his studies on smart metals and bestial mechs until after he completed designing the third variant for the Skull Architect. He didn't want his other stalker to send out another Shadow Courier to remind him of his obligations!

His lack of coordination hampered his efforts a bit. However, it also offered a good opportunity for him to retrain his fine control over his motor functions.

He also started to flex the new Sub-Skills he acquired by eliminating some subtle flaws and suboptimal implementations in all of his variants. His variants of the Caskar Pike, the Toroz Ruby and the Jinven became a little more flawless, which should stave off some the Skull Architect's ire.

As the Barracuda was less than a week away from Leemar, Ves received a disturbing call. He was putting the finishing touches of his variant of the Jinven and did not look glad.

However, upon seeing who called him, Ves understood why his mute didn't work. "It's Gloriana again."

Should he accept or not?

"I better not."

Ves rejected the call. For good measure, he turned off his comm entirely.

Yet seconds later, a projection came to life in his stateroom. Ves might have turned off his personal comm, but the Barracuda possessed its own communication system!

The tall, life-like projection of Gloriana appeared in view. This time, she wore a trendy ensemble of smart clothing that made her look both chic and fashionable.

It was a pity that Gloriana did not look happy at the moment! Her fists were pressed against her hips and a cute pout marred her face.

"Ves Larkinson! Did you just reject my call?!"

"Nonono! I err I was just about to take a bath and turned off my comm beforehand!"

"Who would believe such a ridiculous excuse? Comms are waterproof!"

"Not mine. It's a cheaper model! I can't afford anything better!"

Gloriana shook her head in stern disappointment. "Stop making excuses. Regardless of whether you are ready or not, you better not reject my calls again. I'll punish you if you do."

Her words caused Ves to shake a little, especially at the end. Although she didn't specify her 'punishment', he figured it was best not to find out!

"I'll do my best to answer your calls." He said perfunctory.

"Great!" She bloomed into a smile. "It's so nice to see you again! I've held back from calling you for so long, but I couldn't take it any longer! I just had to hear your voice again!"

The speed in which she swung her mood disturbed him a bit. Yet Ves also felt happy for making Gloriana happy. He enjoyed seeing her smile for some reason.

"Let's have a virtual date!" She suggested, and activated a command in her own comm that caused his stateroom to fade away, only to be replaced by a scenic virtual vista.

A gorgeous expanse of alien wilderness stretched out before them. Ves and Gloriana both appeared to float above the air, giving them an uninterrupted view of various species of exobeasts living out their placid, simulated lives.

"Come sit with me!"

Ves hesitantly approached and sat next to Gloriana. The woman noticed his apprehension and frowned for a moment.

"Why are you so glum? Is the prospect of spending time with me so scary to you?"

"No!" Ves reflexively shook his head. "I just.. Aren't we moving a little bit fast?"

Obviously, Gloriana disagreed, but she didn't voice out her opinion directly. Instead, she calmed herself and adopted a caring tone.

"Where's your smooth talk, Ves? You weren't so nervous when we initially met. You called me beautiful, right?"

"I did."

"Say it again."

Gloriana's eyes stared at him with so much hope and anticipation that Ves couldn't bring himself to refuse her request.

"You're beautiful." He whispered.

"See? That's not so hard, isn't it? Hihi!" She giggled with glee. "So what have you been doing lately?"

Design variants of works from a notorious criminal mech designer, but Ves couldn't say that over an insecure channel.

"Just.. studying." He lied. "I have to keep sharpening my skills. Becoming a Journeyman is not enough. There's always more to learn."

"I agree!" Gloriana nodded. "There's so much to learn, but our time is so limited. Even if I got my family to help pay for gene boost elixirs and other gene treatments, I still have to spend too much time on my studies. I have no choice if I want to keep up with the demands of my design philosophy!"

"I hear that once you become a Senior, you spend less time on studying existing knowledge and more time on performing original research."

"That's true." She confirmed. "While there's still more to learn, it's not always a good idea to let yourself be dictated by your knowledge. What you know will shape the development of your design philosophy. At a higher level, most mech designers will want to balance out their acquired knowledge with original knowledge they formulated themselves. No Master has emerged who relied entirely on knowledge learned from others to advance!"

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow. He hadn't heard of this before. "How much original knowledge should they develop?"

"As much as possible, though that's clearly impossible. You need to form at least a solid foundation and a decent spread of proficiencies in order to be able to design mechs without any glaring inadequacies. You also need a broad base of knowledge in order to support and to provide context to your original insights."

In other words, it was a balancing act. Mech designers needed to develop enough ingenuity to be able to make new discoveries, but they also had to keep learning in order to apply their discoveries in actual mech designs.

"How far are you into developing your design philosophy? It hasn't been long since you became a Journeyman, right Ves?"

"I already made some decent progress while I was still an Apprentice. My design philosophy is so unusual that I had no choice but to figure out some stuff myself."

She looked very impressed at him. "As expected of the man I have my eye on! When I studied your mech designs, it's fairly notable how distinct they feel. That's not the strength a fresh Journeyman is capable of expressing. I won't let you take the lead, however! I'll work hard to stay ahead of you! What kind of woman would I be if you advanced to Senior before me? My parents would be ashamed!"

Ves didn't know what to say. Shouldn't he be the one to boast how he would advance first and lend her a hand after he became wealthier and more powerful?

"Ahem, I wouldn't mind if you advanced first, though." She smiled coyly.

"Though we'll see if that happens."

"You're on."

Neither of them had an easy path towards becoming a Senior. Ves had to innovate all by himself while Gloriana truly had to study a very broad range of subjects in order to come closer to being able to design the perfect vessels for her clients.

The two chatted a bit longer. Ves found that Gloriana knew a lot more about the circumstances that Journeyman faced, so he gladly listened to her explanations.

"Journeyman ought to be explorers at heart." She stated. "While studying existing knowledge is still vital, they really ought to start doing their own research."

"What if some other mech designer already figured out what you wanted to develop towards?" Ves asked curiously.

"Then you'd instinctively feel it in your design philosophy. For certain reasons that I don't know, if you are researching something that others have already explored, then your design philosophy won't progress as much. Most mech

designers with boring design philosophies are forced to grapple with this problem. The best way to solve it is by forking out their specialty in a direction that hasn't been explored yet by any existing mech designer."

"What about direct disciples? From what I heard, they're pretty much inheriting the design philosophies of their Masters."

"That's different." Gloriana shook her head. "The design philosophies of Masters are different. They are permanent. They have transcended from a single mech designer's exclusive preserve and can easily be shared among multiple mech designers. Direct disciples follow a very different means of progression."

All of this was very fascinating for Ves to hear. If Gloriana was right, then Ves ought to be able to tell whether another mech designer had already tread the same ground as him with regards to his specialization.

Chapter 1290 Leemar Again

Talking to Gloriana wasn't so bad as long as they didn't stray into crazy territory. As long as neither of them discussed their design philosophies in depth, Ves did not have any reason to freak out.

It helped that Gloriana made a serious effort to present a calm facade to Ves. She radiated so much happiness that Ves could not bear to displease such an adoring woman.

Over the course of their 'virtual date', they admired several more virtual sceneries. From untamed planets to bustling cityscapes of highly-advanced planets, Ves enjoyed the backdrop as they mostly talked about professional matters.

Talking about general mech design subjects was safe territory to him. Due to his rapid advancement and quick exit from Centerpoint, he neglected to learn

the essential advice that all Journeymen should hear. Gloriana did him a great favor by patiently explaining what he missed.

"So it matters a lot whether a design philosophy has been realized or not?"
Ves confirmed.

"Yup! Before a mech designer reaches Master, their design philosophy is largely a property of themselves. They won't share it because it will adversely affect their chances of realizing it. I mentioned earlier that if someone is trying to develop their design philosophy in a direction that has already been taken, that it won't bring as many gains."

"Won't that leave mech designers open to sabotage by newcomers who wish to pursue the same design philosophies as theirs?"

"Not as such." Gloriana refuted. "The design philosophy is mainly a possession of the foremost pioneer. Unless they slack off and some other mech designer puts in a huge amount of effort to catch up, the pioneers don't have much to fear"

So it was basically the mech designers who followed afterwards who suffered most of the disadvantages.

A disturbing possibility came to mind, though.

"However, to Journeymen and Seniors, their design philosophies only last while they are alive, right? Doesn't that mean that someone who is pursuing the same direction can just kill off the mech designers in front?"

"It doesn't work that way, Ves. While it's true that if a Journeyman or Senior dies, their design philosophies will go up in smoke, but there are still consequences, though I'm not too sure about them. From what I've heard, the vacated design philosophy still carries a lingering element of the deceased pioneering mech designer. There are some odd theories out there that claims that those who thwarted the dead designer will encounter many hindrances

when they pursue the same design philosophy. I'm not sure whether this is true, but plenty of instances like this have occurred over the years."

Though Gloriana looked a bit skeptical at these claims, Ves could very well see how this could be so. A design philosophy was deeply personal to a mech designer. His own design philosophy was intermingled with his spiritual energy, which meant it also bore his spiritual imprint.

Even if he died, his spiritual imprint would still live on for a time.

It probably exerted a lot of influence if someone he considered his enemy tried to take over his design philosophy.

In contrast, proteges and mech designers who the deceased cared about would probably find it easier to take over the mantle.

"Is this why only Masters get to take on true apprentices and disciples while lesser mech designers are only allowed to mentor proteges?"

"Correct. The differences go beyond commitment and a change of terminology. Mentors are only limited to guiding their proteges. Although they are allowed to guide a protege down a specific path, it cannot be their own unless they are getting old and have given up on realizing their design philosophies. As for Masters, they have two options available. They can mentor their nominal disciples but also impart their design philosophies to their direct disciples."

All of this information broadened his perspective. Ves understood that these patterns of behavior emerged due to the peculiarities of what it meant to 'own' a design philosophy.

What Gloriana described just now only scratched the surface of the murky interactions between mech designers and their design philosophies. Clearly, the distinctive properties of spirituality or psionics was the principle reason why these odd rules were in place.

By the time their date had ended and Gloriana had to go, Ves sincerely thanked her for her assistance.

That caused her to erupt with jubilation. "Anything for you, Ves! I'll call you again!"

The compartment-wide projection faded out, returning his surroundings to his regular old stateroom.

Ves sighed. "Maybe she isn't so bad to hang out with after all."

After a few minutes of adjustment, Ves returned to work. He busied himself with finalizing his variant for the Jinven, and managed to complete it shortly before the Barracuda's arrival at Leemar.

Upon arrival, Ves took a moment to check the local plot as his crew interacted with the system's traffic control.

"This is the third time I've visited Leemar."

While it wasn't as advanced or prosperous as the Centerpoint System, the Leemar System possessed its own charm. As a system which held many universities and educational institutions, a lot of students and researchers frequented Leemar.

What made Leemar a little more special was that it hosted a lot more foreigners than similar star systems in the Coalition. Not every Coalition partner was as open to outsiders as the Carnegie Group.

Even the Vermeer Group, which Master Olson belonged to, did not accept as many foreigners.

As the Barracuda approached Leemar II, she received direct permission from traffic control to land on the surface.

Ves already took this treatment for granted. As an apprentice to a Master who was present on the planet and a Journeyman in his own right, he was far from a typical Leemar student or graduate.

The ship smoothly descended from orbit and landed inside a massive underground hangar meant to accommodate such vessels.

"Sir, the Barracuda originated from the Leemar Institute of Technology. Now that we're here, I'd like to request permission to approach the LIT to service the corvette. While she's only five years old and still works great, a bit of preventative maintenance wouldn't hurt."

As a mech designer, Ves understood the wisdom of preventative maintenance. It was much cheaper and more convenient to service a mech when it was in sound condition than if he waited until the mech wore out and malfunctioned.

However, in some cases, excessive preventative maintenance would end up costing more than a single large overhaul.

It all depended on many factors and it was up to the owner to decide which option was the best.

"Five years is a little short, I think." Ves finally decided. As someone who was in charge of servicing hundreds of mechs at a time, he was familiar with many of the pitfalls when it came to maintenance. "I'll set a budget. Just focus on servicing the thorniest ship components that can't be fixed at home if they break."

"Understood. We've already developed a priority list for that."

The Barracuda was a very nice ship that Ves received for free. That did not mean that using the ship was free. Making a second-class ship meant that Ves needed to pay second-class maintenance costs.

"Another billion bright credits down the drain." Ves muttered as he transferred the required funds to pay the LIT to service the corvette.

Though the LMC and to some extent Ves earned a lot of money these days, it wasn't to the point where he could keep throwing billions of bright credits around.

Nonetheless, paying for proper maintenance on his most often used ship was not a waste of money in his eyes. Once something broke, it probably cost a multitude more money to fix the problem.

Once he disembarked from his ship, he entered a waiting shuttle that brought him straight towards Master Olson's estate on the campus of the LIT.

Along the short journey, Ves looked out of the window and stared at the familiar wreck of the giant Rubarthan juggernaut.

The mega-sized mech still inspired a lot of awe from Ves. In fact, as the shuttle brushed close to the wreck, he even sensed a decent amount of spiritual accumulation had formed inside the wreck!

Ves widened his eyes, though he shouldn't have been surprised. Such an amazing monument should have definitely attracted a huge amount of worship and admiration from all the mech designers who attended the LIT.

"It's too bad it's probably not usable." He sighed.

Once the shuttle passed the juggernaut entirely and landed at the landing zone belonging to the estate, Ves stepped out to greet someone new.

"Welcome to Master Olson's estate." A young woman not much older than him greeted. "I'm Zona Fonseca, a fellow apprentice of our master!"

Ves instantly became intrigued and no longer dismissed the woman as a servant. "You are?"

"Yup! Our Master apprenticed me three years ago! I've been under her care ever since."

"Are you a..."

"Oh, I'm just a nominal disciple like you, so you don't have to bow to me. In fact, I should be looking up to you since you already reached Journeyman! You're an example to all of us ever since we learned the news!"

The two began to walk towards the entrance of the main building while they began to chat.

While Ves had become Master Olson's apprentice for a number of years, he hadn't really interacted with her and her organization. He was too preoccupied with matters at home to interact with Master Olson's other apprentices.

"Master Olson is quite proud of you, in fact!" Zona noted. "Ever since you advanced, she's been exhorting me and the others to take a page out of your book and go out into the galaxy. Studying on Leemar all the time is very comfortable, so many of us don't want to go. What do you think?"

Ves didn't mind giving his own honest insight to a fellow apprentice. "I think mech designers who have everything handed to them on their laps don't have what it takes to become a Journeyman. It requires effort to reach that height, and no one can take you there but yourself."

"So does that mean we all have to go out and fend for ourselves?"

"If you are content with living a normal life, then it's fine if you want to stay in close proximity to our Master. If you want to achieve something great, then you need to depend on yourself, at least when it comes to developing your own design philosophy."

Both of them heard a clapping sound from up ahead.

"Well said, Ves!"

For the first time in years, Ves met with Master Olson in the flesh. Now that he saw her, Ves realized that his increased Spirituality allowed him to sense a hint of the hidden depths in her body.

Her design seed or whatever it turned to after reaching Master was extremely formidable! It was far stronger than the pitiful crystallization that hid in his own mindscape!

Master Olson maintained a tight grip on her spiritual strength, allowing none of it to spill out. Nonetheless, her stature made her appear very extraordinary, particularly to a spiritually sensitive person such as Ves!

Not a single Senior he met came close to reaching this degree of spiritual strength! The gulf between Senior and Master was as wide as the gap between Apprentice and Journeyman.

There was both a quantitative and qualitative difference between the strength of a Senior and the strength of a Master!

"Come inside, Ves." Master Olson calmly said. "Let us catch up and evaluate your progress. We have much to talk about."

Zona separated from Ves as he followed after the Master up the stairs and into a very stately-looking office.

Once they took their seats at the desk, Master Olson eyed him with a piercing glance.

"Congratulations for reaching Journeyman." She started. "To be frank, I expected you to take at least another decade, if longer."

"I experienced a lot of events that gave me a lot of inspiration and insight." Ves offered his pre-prepared excuse.

"You don't have to understate your accomplishments. Your rapid rise can't be done by any mech designer. As far as I know, you haven't enjoyed any

intensive tutoring, mentoring or instruction by other mech designers. Your design philosophy is all you. Tell me the truth. How did you advance so quickly?"

Uh oh. It seemed that Master Olson didn't buy his previous answer. Masters weren't easy to fool! At the very least, Ves didn't believe he could deceive her as easily as Professor Oodiv from the MTA!