

Chapter 1331 Empty Pride

The Barracuda, accompanied by the ships of the Battle Criers, briskly crossed the stars in the next couple of weeks.

The small fleet left the territories of the Kinner Tribe without fanfare and cut through the numerous other states that led to their next stop, the Chuko Republic.

Though Gavin continually hinted that they'd be better off making a wide circle around the problematic state, Ves resolutely stuck to his choice.

"It's just a couple of isolated incidents, Benny. You're far too much of a worrywart. The odds of encountering raiders is exceedingly small." Ves calmly replied as he scratched Lucky's chin.

"That does not make our journey any less dangerous! Recently, there have been stories about convoys being waylaid by well-armed raiding forces! The attacks all took place on the major trading lanes as well!"

"Those attacks made sense because those ships were carrying valuable trade goods. Please recall our fleet composition. Does the tiny Barracuda and the shabby and skinny vessels of the Battle Criers look like we're carrying any valuables?"

"Uhh.. "

"Exactly! Our cargo capacity is pathetic compared to conventional trade convoys! Any decent pirate with a miniscule brain could figure out that the Ion Tracker and the Glaze Hopper, our largest vessels, have devoted most of their capacities to carrying mechs! As for the Purple Star, Belfast and Okuri, the three support ships are so small that it's incredibly obvious that they are only carrying low-value supplies!"

"You're worth something, boss. The market price for a captured Journeyman Mech Designer is enough to make an entire pirate gang set for life! Heck, even the Barracuda herself is worth a great fortune if she's captured intact!"

"..That's true." Ves admitted. "Yet they'll have to get to us first. Our fleet is much more mobile than a typical trading convoy. None of our ships are floating tubs who require half a day to finish cycling their FTL drives. If we happen to stumble in an awful situation, the Barracuda can jump into FTL ahead of time, thereby depriving the raiders a reason to keep fighting against the Battle Criers."

He already thought about every likely scenario that might pop up during their entry into Chuko space. Even if the state degenerated into a microcosm of the frontier, Ves still expressed confidence that most of the belligerents involved would rather turn their against each other. There was no benefit to assailing a random bystander like him who was just passing through the state!

After packing off Gavin and his concerns for the day, Ves still had to spend some time with the other guests on his ship. He checked in with Nitaa and Crindon who were off performing their duties. Nothing much had changed on their end so the conversations remained brief.

Only then did Ves divert his attention to the more problematic guests aboard the Barracuda. Ves held Lucky in his arms as he entered the ship's lounge.

"Well. I thought I might find you two here." He spoke upon entry.

Imon and Casella Ingvar still dressed themselves in their impeccably sharp household guard uniform. It was as if they still clung to the illusion that House Ingvar still stood proud.

"Mr. Larkinson." "Mr. Larkinson."

"Have you moped enough yet?" He spoke. "I'm not paying you to act like passengers. I'm paying you to pilot mechs."

"We've been keeping our skills sharp by practicing in the simulators!" Casella protested.

Ves slammed his fist against his palm. "You're not doing your jobs! Even if we aren't forced into battle, there are plenty of responsibilities that mech pilots ought to fulfill. You used to be the commander of your household mech company, so you should know them very well, Casella!"

"We can't! Those uncouth Battle Criers disgust me! They disgust us both!"

"Imon Ingvar, are you a mercenary or are you a noble?"

His question cut deep. Both Ingvar siblings became downtrodden all of a sudden. They tried to reject the reality as long as possible, but they were simply staving off the inevitable.

"Look, regardless of your dark and dreary pasts, you are working for someone now. You may think little of the Battle Criers, but the Kinner mercenary corps has dutifully deployed patrols whenever our fleet arrives at a new star system. They've been keeping all of us secure without any of the whining that you exhibit. Tell me, please. Between the Battle Criers and you two, who has been productive and who has acted like lazy bums?"

The Ingvars looked more and more depressed as their employer confronted them directly on their lack of work ethic.

While Ves had been more than understanding of their personal circumstances, at some point they just had to pick themselves up and move on with their lives. He didn't hesitate to bring out his inner Devil Tongue in order to give the pair a good kick in the butt.

"He's right." Casella spoke. She had always been the more rational and calm-headed of the pair. "We are not doing ourselves and our employer a favor by avoiding the Battle Criers."

"But Casella! Those unwashed brutes are completely incapable of acting with decorum! They smell! They laugh! They get drunk whenever they aren't at their posts!"

"At the very least they refrain from intoxicating themselves while they are on duty." She replied.

Ves scoffed. "The first steps you need to take is recognize the reality of your new status. From the way I hear you talk, you still turn up your noses whenever you think of the Battle Criers. Are you really better than them now that you are fellow mercenaries? In fact, the Battle Criers are more than justified to laugh and turn up their noses at you! The reason why those Kinners mock you is that you act like you're better than them while you are technically their juniors in the mercenary community!"

Again, Ves landed another fatal blow at their fragile prides. To their credit, Casella Ingvar managed to accept the reality of their situation a lot better than he expected.

It seemed that her previous leadership failure in allowing her former household guard company to mutiny humbled her deeply. After suffering such a grievous blow to her self-inflated sense of worth, how could she still pretend that she was still hot stuff?

Unfortunately, her brother Imon still required more convincing. "The Battle Criers are more like civilized pirates than proper mercenaries! I wouldn't be surprised if they engaged in surreptitious piracy between missions!"

"Are you willing to say that to Commander Cinnabar to his face?" Ves pressed as he stepped closer.

That caused the brash brother to look a lot less sure of himself. While Imon was confident he could beat the Kinner mercenary commander in a fair mech duel, if it came to fisticuffs he did not possess as much confidence!

"..The commander is a fine mercenary leader."

Ves nodded in satisfaction. "There's nothing wrong with being proud. Pride in yourself, your heritage and your accomplishments is essential to maintaining your confidence. But pride without the requisite strength to back it up is arrogance. If there's one thing I know, it's that arrogant people don't last long in the galaxy."

The harsh lessons he shoved through their throats might hurt, but they all rang true. While Ves disliked adopting a tough approach, weeks had gone by without any hint of significant progress. At some point, something had to give.

Fortunately, Ves had built up quite a bit of experience in dressing people down. It was all about presenting himself as an authoritative figure who knew what he was talking about. The fact that he was their employer already gave him a lot of leverage.

In the end, the two reluctantly decided that it might be best to get their lives back in order. Ves heavily pushed them towards returning to the Ion Tracker and trying to see if they could get along with the 'uncouth' and 'barbaric' Battle Criers.

"Don't take their attitude too seriously." He advised the Ingvar siblings. "For all of their rough exterior, the Battle Criers are an accomplished mercenary corps who have been through more battles than you've been in school. All of them are blooded warriors who have a wealth of wisdom to teach you as long as you respect their honor."

"Truly?" Imon asked skeptically.

"Don't take my words for it. Look up their record at the Mercenary Association's virtual portal. They have a long list of verified battles to their name. While their list of victories is already respectable, they've suffered

some losses as well, but they always managed to bounce back. That is truly worthy of respect."

One of the reasons why Ves liked the Battle Criers was that they had seen their fair share of hardship. Each time they suffered disaster, Commander Cinnabar always managed to lead his mercenary corps back up its feet.

They were no fancy ornaments who looked impressive but broke into pieces when knocked.

After Ves called for the Ion Tracker to send a shuttle to the Barracuda to pick up the two mech pilots, he returned to his stateroom.

Upon entering, he tossed Lucky into the air like usual and sat behind his desk.

"I've studied enough about bestial mechs and smart metal tech to start with the design process."

Too much theory and not enough practice led to overcomplicated designs. While Ves still had much to learn, his lack of experience in the two aforementioned fields meant that some of the most advanced literature became a bit too abstract for him to comprehend.

"Mech design revolves around application of knowledge. People like me fare best when learning by doing."

He was itching to unleash his pent-up creative desires. The last time he designed a mech was when he completed the Transcendent Messenger. A long time had passed since then, and more than enough time had passed for his once-depleted spiritual energy to return to an optimal level.

"If I don't start designing mechs very soon, it'll become crazier than Gloriana at this rate!"

Ves had no idea how other mech designers coped when they couldn't design mechs.

Having thought long and hard about how to resolve the inherent contradiction between bestial mechs and smart metal tech, Ves came up with a very practical solution.

"Bestial mechs sacrifice flexibility for rigid performance, while smart metal tech introduced flexibility at the cost of raw performance. Combining the two sounds like an awful idea, but who says the entire mech needs to be made out of smart metal?"

When Ves thought about smart metal tech, he instantly recalled the amazing smart metal mech that Axelar once witnessed during a mech games match. The mech dazzled him with its infinite transformations, but the machine eventually faltered against an opponent that beat its malleable form with overwhelming force.

"Bestial mechs and tiger mechs specifically will fare exceptionally poorly if their internal frames aren't robust enough to handle the stress."

His solution to that problem? Avoid incorporating smart metal in the internal frame of his mech design!

A much smarter application of smart metal would be to implement it to his design in a targeted manner. Only the parts that benefited from the properties of this soft but flexible substance ought to be molded with smart metal!

Framing the issue in this perspective gave Ves a lot more hopes about the viability of his design project.

"So the starting point will be a tiger mech frame. Which parts would perform better if they were made out of smart metal rather than rigid alloys?"

At first, nothing stood out. The tiger mech type had been refined over several centuries, and many mech designers worked to define a set of standards that worked great for everybody.

"The only issue is that those standards and conventions are fully geared towards mechs with rigid frames." He thoughtfully rubbed his chin while Lucky was ruffling up his hair in revenge for tossing his cat in the air. "If I want to apply smart metal onto a tiger mech that is more than just a gimmick, then I'll have to revisit the entire concept of this ferocious mech type."

Chapter 1332 Conditional Mechs

The advantage of resorting to nanomachines rather than uncontrollable atoms and molecules was that they could be ordered around to change shapes. This was the principal advantage of smart metal.

Yet for this single property, smart metal gave up a lot.

"The limitations of smart metal tech are many." He reminded himself.

Instead of consisting of solid slabs of metal, they could better be described as a collection of tiny little machines that hold themselves together on the microscopic level.

As Ves had already witnessed beforehand, applying brute force could easily overwhelm those 'active' defenses.

In addition, the forces the nanomachines exert on each other in order to hold themselves together needed to be powered. Once they ran out of juice, they were held together by very weak physical bonds which could easily be snapped after suffering some light hits.

The third limitation of smart metal was that they were more expensive and provided less significantly less performance than an equivalent solid material. The effective strength of smart metal vastly improved when they incorporated exotics, but this rapidly increased the cost.

"A smart metal mech can easily cost twice or thrice as much as a regular alloy mech despite sharing comparable specs!"

In essence, a smart metal mech at least doubled the price in exchange for gaining the option to transform!

Whether this function was worth the cost or not depended on the needs of the customer.

However, the general consensus in much of the Komodo Star Sector was that smart metal mechs were gimmicks at best and a trap at worst.

"It's easy to see why everyone considers them to be traps with the amount of money they consume."

A state that converted its mech military entirely to smart metal mechs would basically be committing suicide. They were only able to field half as many mechs as before, but those machines weren't necessarily twice as good to compensate for their reduced numbers.

For this reason, fielding smart metal mechs simply didn't make any sense from a macro perspective. They only truly showcased their value during exceptional circumstances where a flexible mech might survive where a rigid mech may not. They also might be able to achieve surprising results in the mech games.

Yet for most parts of human space, smart metal mechs firmly acquired an awful reputation in the mech community.

"It's going to be a real challenge trying to design a smart metal tiger mech. While I'm known to design some whacky mechs, this will be pushing it too far."

Unless he designed a compelling mech design that achieved a level of performance far above the industry standard, he might as well forget about aiming to bring his work to the market.

The market simply expressed no demand for mechs that were twice as expensive, required constant power to maintain integrity and would falter easily against heavy impacts.

His solution? Aim to minimize the inclusion of smart metal. By applying it only to the parts which benefited from the additional flexibility, Ves could avoid weakening its essential structural support.

Yet as much as he wanted to, the System limited how far he could go. He recalled the wording of the upgrade mission and it stated that he had to design a 'smart metal mech'.

While the definition of a smart metal mech was not entirely precise, the nerds over at the MTA literally debated for decades on this very topic.

No smart metal mech completely consisted of smart metal. It required at least some solid components to perform essential functions. For example, the power reactor and the cockpit really did not fare very well when they were made out of smart metal.

It didn't help that the average proportion of smart metal in this mech classification varied greatly. Some only possessed as low as fifteen percent while others incorporated eighty percent.

Eventually, the MTA set down its foot and came to the consensus. A proper smart metal mech incorporated at least twenty-five percent of this remarkable material.

"Twenty-five percent is a good threshold." Ves noted. "That's the point where smart metal significantly shifts the mech concept of the design in question."

A floor of twenty-five percent was a lot more than Ves was comfortable with. If he had to replace twenty-five percent of a conventional tiger mech frame with smart metal, it would definitely perform like a cripple on the battlefield!

For this reason, Ves saw the need to abandon the standard convention of tiger mechs. Instead of blindly adopting this bestial mech type, he instead went back to the drawing board.

"It feels as if I'm reinventing the wheel again. In an age where solid wooden or metal wheels are common, can I invent an inflatable tire?"

Many mech designers tried and failed to develop a mech type that did justice to smart metal tech. Even Masters ran aground when they tried to square the circle.

"The most successful attempts are actually partial failures." He muttered.

"Meow."

Lucky floated down on his desk and curiously poked the projection of various smart metal mechs in action.

Ves chuckled. "No, Lucky. Eating smart metal is a bad idea. You'll just grow weaker in exchange for some mild transformation abilities. Do you really want to become more vulnerable?"

"Meow."

"Even if you have all of your stealth tricks at your disposal, you're too precious to risk it. Be content with what you have!"

"Meow!"

As Lucky grumpily jumped away, Ves gloomingly crossed his arms. His reluctance to see Lucky turn into a smart metal cat exemplified his own misgivings on this matter.

"If I don't want Lucky to incorporate smart metal, then how can I ever impose this indignity on a mech pilot?"

As Ves puzzled over this issue, he simply found it too difficult to come up with an altered mech concept that added real value.

"Perhaps it can't be done."

Ves possessed a lot of confidence in his abilities, but that didn't necessarily mean he disrespected every rule in the book. When he initially came up with a vision for his Aurora Titan design, he spotted a flaw in common convention.

This time, he lacked an obvious direction he could pursue to design a smart metal mech that at least maintained parity with regular mechs.

The immense difficulties he faced right now made him rein back his ambition. Reinventing the wheel was all well and good, but he didn't think it was possible for him to invent an inflatable tire with his current skills.

If Ves wanted to complete both of his Upgrade Missions with a single design, then he needed to be more creative and see what was actually permissible. He recalled one of the Upgrade Mission in order to see where he could find a loophole to exploit.

[Upgrade Mission - Metallurgy]

Mission: Design and Fabricate a smart metal mech

...

Description

...

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.

...

"Hmm. Now that I recall the wording, there's quite a lot open to interpretation."

Ves focused his attention on the demands set by the System. He listed out the key words.

"Smart metal mech. Viable mech design. Meeting standards. Fabricate a copy. Sell the copy to a 'worthy' customer."

That was quite a lot to go through, but Ves broke it down into pieces. First, the demand to design a viable smart metal mech that met the System's standards meant he could not make a half-hearted effort.

He recalled he once cheated the System by designing an absolute abomination of a mech design just so he could fulfill the letter though not the spirit of its requirements.

He snorted. "I guess I can't outright design another piece of junk this time."

The mech at least had to be attractive enough to appeal to an actual customer.

The definition of worthy customer varied from person to person. Ves probably guessed that the buyer needed to be at least a conventional mech buyer.

"Are collectors included in this definition?"

He was inclined to say no. The mech community generally did not regard collectors as worthy customers because they bought mechs for purposes other than deploying them in battle.

"Buying a mech only to squirrel them away in a depot or putting them up for display is a perversion of their actual purpose."

A lot of purists hated people treating mechs like a fancy statue or accessory. Mechs were machines of war! Their true home was on the battlefield!

Considering what he knew about the System, Ves guessed that it wouldn't let him get away with designing an ornamental mech only to sell it to a gullible collector that liked to gather shiny mechs.

Ves had to design a smart metal mech that was actually viable in battle.

Yet... the definition of viable did not mean viable in every situation. "There are mechs that are tailored to many specific circumstances! Even a smart metal mech may perform exceptionally well in the right conditions!"

Instead of trying to do the impossible and design a mech that performed well in general circumstances, why not focus on one specific circumstance instead?

He already did it before. His Enduring Protector which he designed back on Aeon Corona VII could also be called a conditional mech. This was because he expressly designed it to counteract the pervasive breakdown effect that caused regular mechs to malfunction exceptionally frequently.

Ves just needed to find the right circumstances where a smart metal tiger mech performed much better than usual due to the presence of anomalous effects or weird planetary conditions.

"When it comes to anomalies, nothing can beat the Nyxian Gap on this front!"

The vast weirdness of the Nyxian Gap was in itself a huge anomaly! Inside this enormous stretch of asteroid-filled space, numerous large satellites consisting of strange materials threw up all kinds of whacky hazards to outfits wanting to exploit their rare resources.

"There's probably at least one strange place out there where a smart metal tiger mech can be of actual use."

Having decided to design a conditional mech, the next step would be to determine his budget. How much money should he invest in this project?

Ves was inclined to invest as minimum as possible. While he still possessed an ample amount of money, his current spending pattern was unsustainable.

"I should really stop throwing my credits around so much."

The cost to design a single mech was immense. It wasn't that much expensive to design a mech with an eye towards mass production.

The problem was that Ves did not possess a lot of suitable component licenses. Not only did he need to acquire a whole new set of component licenses that were specifically tailored for bestial mechs, he also had to acquire a rather expensive smart metal license.

Even if he cheaped out, he could easily imagine facing a total bill of two billion credits or more for all the licenses!

An ugly grimace appeared on his face. "It might be worth it if I design at least one commercial mech with those licenses. It's definitely not worth it if all I intend to produce is a single copy."

Although Ves sometimes had the illusion that money came easily to him these days, 2 billion credits was still a significant amount of capital.

Faced with this unpleasant reality, Ves opted to take a more crooked alternative.

He decided to pirate some licenses and make use of their component specifications without paying the requisite license fees.

Although such practices rapidly earned the ire of the MTA, Ves just had to make sure no one found out about it. Plenty of pirate designers made use of licenses without paying a single K-coin and always got away with it! Why shouldn't Ves be able to do the same?

"It's fine as long as I don't mass produce my work. No one will care." He determined self-confidently.

Chapter 1333 Lone Sample

After making his choice to design a conditional mech that made use of pirated licenses, Ves began to perform a lot of research.

Not only did he need to find the most appropriate licenses to borrow without paying, he also had to find an appropriate environment to design towards.

A lot of weird planets, moons, asteroids and other crazy satellites and land masses existed in the galaxy. Within the Komodo Star Sector, the Nyxian Gap stood out as a hotbed of anomalous satellites!

Most of them did not offer any opportunities for a smart metal mech to showcase their capabilities.

Nonetheless, after days of searching and reading through scattered reports with questionable accuracy, he narrowed down his choices.

Of the selection, he made a careful consideration and kept ruling out more and more environments until one was left.

Within the Nyxian Gap, a rogue planet existed in complete darkness.

The Nyxian Gap partially received its name due to its absence of stars to provide warmth, heat and a solid gravitic anchor to ease FTL navigation.

The rogue planet that Ves had settled upon should have been a cold, lifeless freezing ball floating randomly in space.

Yet due to its very active internal geological processes as well as the presence of strange exotics, it managed to be significantly warmer than the absolute freezing point!

The planet called Mournshell was still cold enough to freeze water, though, but colonies could potentially settle on the planet if not for one major caveat.

Its upper surface shifted frequently. Sometimes violently. Sometimes gently. Yet the terrain never remained the same after the passing of another day.

If that wasn't enough, the rogue planet was also a heavy gravity planet! Although its gravity was only a bit more than three times standard gravity,

these conditions already imposed significant penalties on conventional mechs trying to operate within its gravity well.

In many other cases, planets without an atmosphere tentatively made it possible for spaceborn mechs to operate in their airless skies.

Yet the heavy gravity of Mournshell threw a significant wrench in those plans! Most spaceborn mechs performed very poorly when subjected to standard gravity, let heavy gravity!

A couple of other conditions complicated the planet's already problematic environment. The omnipresent asteroids floating in the Nyxian Gap led to a lot of collisions that not only threw the surrounding lands in disarray, but also sometimes introduced new exotics that came with their own strange effects.

"This also makes Mournshell attractive."

One of the defining properties of Mournshell was that all of the exotics interacting with the planet and each other resulted in detectable interactions. Value medium and high-grade exotics that were usually inert and extremely hard to detect would suddenly broadcast their presence upon dropping onto Mournshell!

This was very exceptional because the odds of digging into a random asteroid in order to uncover valuable exotics was very small and not economic!

As a result, Mournshell turned into a small hotbed of activity as a number of outfits vigorously competed to retrieve these valuable exotics!

The planet's hazardous, unpredictable and ever-changing environment meant that flexible mechs were in much more demand there. The only reason why none of the outfits made use of smart metal mechs was because they were too expensive and high maintenance to make them fully viable.

"There should be at least one customer among them who is stupid enough to buy my mech." He muttered.

Having set Mournshell as his target environment, Ves now possessed a solid direction for his design project. While he still needed to refine a suitable mech concept to base his vision around, it would only be a matter of time before he produced a workable draft design.

"That's enough for now."

He decided to pause his work at this time in order to mull over the configuration of his upcoming mech. He closed down his terminal, stood up from his chair and stretched his body.

While he could continue to wrack his brains over his mech concept, he didn't feel very inspired at the moment. He also didn't feel like forcing the creative process at the moment.

"It's best to stew on it for a couple of days. I might come up with something fantastic in the meantime."

He idly sauntered over to his bed and picked up Lucky, who was peacefully lounging on its surface.

"Meow?"

"You big baby. Are you suffering from constipation or something? It's been months since you crapped out a gem!"

"Meow."

"Maybe I should feed you something that works as a laxative in your systems. Should I feed you another nutrient pack wrapper?"

"Meow!"

Lucky angrily squirmed out of his hands and turned intangible before sinking beneath the deck. The thought of eating another nutrient pack wrapper still gave him nightmares!

Shaking his head, Ves left his stateroom in order to stretch his legs. Just as he exited the hatch, he encountered Fe Nitaa standing guard in the corridor.

"I thought I already told you that it's redundant for you to stand here while our fleet is in FTL."

"I'm sorry, sir. I've been taught to take my duty seriously. There is always the possibility that a stowaway might be lurking on this ship for many days."

"That's unlikely. Lucky would have sniffed the intruders out by now. His senses are much more formidable than you think."

"I doubt an animated machine can smell what I can sense." Nitaa stoically replied. She never saw Lucky in action so she still regarded him as a luxurious toy. "Even if your confidence is not misplaced, some redundancy never hurts."

He couldn't argue with that. "Very well. I suppose you can perform your duties as you see fit as long as it doesn't slow down your training. How is that going by the way?"

"My progress is.. sufficient. There are only so many hours I can spend on studying and exercising. I dislike staying idle, and performing my duties gives me the peace I need to reflect on my gains. At my current rate of progress, I estimate I'll obtain my first new certifications in a couple of weeks."

"Do you have any hobbies or things you do for fun?"

"..."

"I see."

"Kinnners such as me are simple people. We try to avoid extravagance. The ideal Kinner is one who takes pleasure in the vocations they have been trained to perform."

This was an excellent way to keep Kinnners like Nitaa motivated, but it also had a more insidious element. By indoctrinating the Kinnners to derive their main form of satisfaction from their work, they were much less likely to protest their slave-like circumstances.

Perhaps that was what always bothered Ves about Nitaa and the Kinnners. They were so dedicated to their work and other Kinner values that they hardly had anything left to spare on other priorities.

To Ves, the Kinnners were the results of humans trying to program other humans from birth in a very deliberate way.

He doubted that the Kinnners who grew up in overcrowded camps actually possessed any real choices. Their lives were largely out of their own hands. Instead, the tribe decided everything.

The lack of agency was definitely one of the reasons why the Kinnners easily submitted to orders and rarely questioned authority.

This turned Nitaa into a very strange entity to Ves. Many times, he mistook her for a bot with how little consideration she demanded out of him. The Kinnners truly trained their own people well!

He harbored some hopes of opening her up a bit and reverse some of her bot-like traits. He knew it would be an uphill battle that might take years before achieving any results. It was never easy to get someone to unlearn something they'd been taught was right for their entire life.

After a quiet walk, Ves entered the small lab and workshop area of his ship. Placed on one of the work tables was a container that held one of his purchases from Centerpoint.

Over the last couple of months, he occasionally dropped by his lab in order to study the properties of the spiritually-reactive rock.

As he moved the rock out of its container, he studied its outward, grey meteorite exterior.

Its lack of reactivity in normal circumstances along with its deceptively boring appearance made it exceptionally difficult for Ves to find any noteworthy points about the exotic.

He also failed to find out why the rock interacted with spirituality in the first place. Its material composition was no different from that of a bog-standard metallic asteroid that consisted of regular elements such as iron and nickel.

Yet its one distinguishing feature was enough to set it apart from all the other asteroids!

"It's like how all humans look the same, but some of them are more remarkable because they can pilot mechs. Of this small group, only a handful of them are expert pilots or higher."

The important point was that despite this disparity, it was very hard to distinguish them from each other if they didn't make their identities clear!

Ves faced the same problem with the material he tentatively named the P-stone. The P stood for psionically reactive, because that was what the rock did. It reacted to his spirituality when the vast majority of other materials might as well be intangible!

He held the rock in his hands and tentatively injected a small mote of his spiritual energy in the rock. The mote joined a larger but still insignificant ball of spiritual energy he injected in previous times.

"Hmm. Seems like it's not full yet."

The donation of spiritual energy discomfited Ves a bit. His mind was already starting to churn faster in order to produce a new batch of spiritual energy to replace what it lost.

Right now, he only possessed a single sample of P-stone, so he was very reluctant to perform any damaging tests on it. After he put it through a host of scanners, Ves had stalled in his research because of the need to keep the P-stone intact.

In that light, he decided to make use of the P-stone as a storage container for his excess spiritual energy. He had experimented with donating and retrieving his spiritual energy several times.

So far, Ves did not experience any apparent problems with absorbing previously-donated spiritual energy. It appeared that it wasn't subject to any decay or degeneration within a timespan of a few months.

It remained to be seen if his spiritual energy would still stay 'fresh' after spending years locked inside the P-stone. So far, Ves had not perceived any measurable losses, but he could only judge by feeling as no instrument could measure the exact quantities of spiritual energy.

"I feel like I'm merely scratching the surface of what it is capable of." He muttered as he placed the P-stone back onto the work table.

So far, using it as an impromptu storage container for his excess spiritual energy was already a boon.

When his spiritual energy level reached its maximum capacity, his mind stopped producing more of it. This was a big waste in his eyes as it didn't seem it required anything but time and a bit of thought and emotion to produce new spiritual energy.

Due to his abnormally high mental attributes, Ves frequently suffered from an excess of thoughts as his creativity continued to bounce inane ideas in his mind.

Since his overactive thinking seemed to be doing more harm than good, why not put it to better use as fuel for his spiritual energy production?

Whether it actually worked or not, Ves could at least count on accumulating an emergency reserve of spiritual energy. If he ever ended up in an emergency where he would be forced to exert his Spirituality in a very consuming fashion, he might be able to top himself up again in a matter of hours with a charged P-stone!

That wasn't all. Aside from using the P-stone to store his own spiritual energy, what would happen if he stuffed someone or something else's spiritual energy into the mix?

The possibilities were endless, but only if he figured out a way to make them work!

"If only I had more samples!"

Chapter 1334 Overdue Talk

Possessing a single P-stone already opened up so many options to Ves. Yet he only had one of it so far. Due to its very faint and indistinct properties, finding another P-stone was going to be incredibly difficult!

All Ves had to go on was the vendor's claims that some of the people who came in touch with it fainted for no apparent reason.

This was a very vague criteria that made it incredibly difficult for him to find another sample on the galactic net. Too many weird space rocks did something similar, though usually toxins, radioactivity or some other mundane was the cause.

"Still, if I ever post a purchasing request for this rock, I'll probably be inundated with millions of people offering worthless asteroids to me! It's too hard to distinguish the real ones from the fakes by remote!"

In order to test the authenticity of the P-stone, he had to brush them with his Spirituality. Observing a projection of the offered samples wouldn't allow him to do so. Only by coming across them in person would he be able to determine if he was being scammed!

"It's a nightmare!"

The P-stone certainly didn't make it easy for him to accumulate large quantities of it, but that made it all the more valuable. The single application he found for this remarkable exotic already excited him to no end!

"I really hope it's not a unique manifestation and that more samples exist in the galaxy!"

It was an unfortunate fact that some exotics were so rare that only a single known sample had been found by humanity.

Doubtlessly, a large part of why no other samples became known was because a lot of researchers jealously kept their findings to themselves.

Even so, Ves might have to face a possibility where the P-stone he possessed right now might be the only sample of its kind! This made him even more reluctant to experiment with it further.

Finding another P-stone sample therefore became another priority to him. He already set up automated search routines that regularly trawled the news for any mention of suspect exotics that caused people to faint.

So far, Ves only came across false positives and dubious matches. It really didn't help that he failed to find something to distinguish P-stone from any other metallic asteroid that others could actually measure.

He looked around the tiny lab of his ship. A number of small lab machines graced his sight. All of them were smaller, miniaturized versions of proper lab equipment. The limited selection and notable absence of lab machines that took up a lot more space meant he still hadn't recorded every parameter of his P-stone.

"I need access to a better and more complete lab."

A normal lab wouldn't do. His intuition told him that the P-stone resembled normal asteroids so much that he would likely find nothing of use in a normal lab.

"I need to access a fully-equipped lab from a second-rate state!"

He knew what better labs looked like. Not only did he visit Master Olson's expansive underground workshop with Oleg a couple of years ago, he also came in touch with fantastic CFA lab equipment during his time on the Starlight Megalodon.

Compared to those wonderful lab equipment, the tiny machines aboard his ship were laughably shallow and underpowered!

Yet.. where could he access such a lab?

"Don't tell me I have to ask my girlfriend for a favor?"

Just the thought of stepping foot in the matriarchy-dominated state sent shivers through his back!

"No thanks!"

After he poked the P-stone around, only to achieve no new results, he dejectedly left his lab. Arranging access to a better-equipped lab would take some doing. Considering that his to-do list continued to grow, Ves decided to put the issue in the backburner for now.

"Maybe a convenient opportunity will present itself during my tour." He muttered.

Days continued to pass by as Ves continued to work on various matters. Between developing a mech concept, playing with his P-stone and managing his relations with his new Kinner hires,

As the Barracuda and her escort came closer and closer to crossing the border into the Chuko Republic, Ves decided that enough time had passed for him to address a long-simmering matter.

It was time for him to talk to Ketis.

Deciding that it was best if he had some moral support, he tracked down Lucky who was lounging at the engineering bay for some reason.

"What the heck are you doing crawling all over the FTL drive?"

"Meow."

"Whatever. Come over here. I need your help in keeping Ketis from becoming depressed or erupt in some stupid outburst."

"Meow?"

"Just come with me, you little critter."

After grabbing Lucky, he returned to his stateroom and placed a call to Ketis' comm.

Half a minute went by before Ketis appeared into view. Her projection showed her wearing typical work clothes. The smudges on her garments made it clear that she had just come out of performing hands-on work to a mech.

"Ves.. I didn't know you'd call."

"I would have called sooner, but I have a lot of work to deal with." He said lamely. "Uhm, Lucky missed you."

He held out Lucky.

"Meow."

Lucky's cute impression finally managed to elicit a smile from the girl. "Ohh, you're so cute!"

After Ketis babbled a bit with Lucky, she finally turned her attention back to Ves. "Thanks for that. I really missed Lucky. I wish I had my own version, but all I have to keep me warm in bed is his gift shop plushie."

That reminded him of something. "Ah, I did promise to get a pet for you. I'll be sure to grab one for you during my trip."

"That would be.. Appreciated." She offered a brief smile before tackling something more serious. "Ves... about Gloriana..."

Uh oh.

"Yes..?"

A short silence stretched as Ketis tried to find the right words to say. After bowing her head for a time, she finally found her courage and faced him head-on without any trace of doubt.

"I'm happy for you. Truly. Gloriana sounds like a great gal and she's certainly really happy to be with you seeing how vocal she is. You really deserve to be someone who can keep up with you. That's something I can't match."

"Ketis..."

Her demeanor radiated utter seriousness, which was a far cry from the playful girl he knew before.

"Look, I've had months to think over it. I admit that I took a fancy on you, but it's over now, alright? I wised up. I looked at myself and saw that I wasn't acting anything like a Swordmaiden. That's over now."

"What does that mean?"

"A Swordmaiden's primary responsibility is to look out for herself and her fellow sisters. After spending so much time in civilized space, I started to lose sight of that, but no more. Nothing is more important than for me to become a better mech designer. Only by becoming a Journeyman can I truly help Commander Lydia lead the Swordmaidens to their former glory."

"That's a very admirable determination, but you've already been working towards that, right?"

"I'll do everything possible to help my sisters." She reiterated. "Right now, that means I want to continue to work and study under you. I won't let my feelings get in the way of what's important. Someday, there may come a time where I'm in a much better position to help the Swordmaidens by returning to their side."

That meant that Ketis would definitely be leaving him and his company. Ves always knew that this possibility might come one day, but hearing her mention this meant that her determination to leave at some point grew stronger.

Ves did not blame her for this decision. Keeping Ketis as a permanent member of his design team was no longer possible.

"I'll support you regardless of where you go. As your mentor, I hope you can find your own way."

She smiled. "Thanks for that. You're a really great mech designer. I still have much to learn, and I don't plan on leaving anytime soon."

As she spoke, Ves contemplated whether he should reveal his intention to go on a grand expedition to her. Once he embarked for another star cluster, it would be inconvenient to bring her along.

He decided to break the news.

"Ketis, to tell you the truth, my plans have changed. Due to the special nature of my design philosophy, I..."

He gave her the same spiel he gave Gloriana. Though his 'girlfriend' easily bought his story, Ketis on the other hand narrowed her eyes on him. The way she studied him made him feel as if she figured him out!

"You know, running away is something that always happens in the frontier. Sometimes there are threats that are simply too overwhelming to confront head on. There's no shame in distancing yourself from something you can't beat. Don't you agree?"

Ves tentatively nodded. "Right."

"So your plan is to leave the star cluster ten years later?"

"Yeah. It's not set in stone. I might depart a few years later than that, but not much longer."

The implication was obvious to the both of them. Ketis "Okay, Ves. That probably sounds like the right time for me to return to the frontier. Until then, I'll make the most of my stay here. Will that be alright?"

"That's fine. I won't mind if you decide to join me on my expedition. You'll always have a place in my crew."

She firmly shook her head. "No thanks. I don't want to get in the way between you and your girlfriend."

They moved on from this awkward topic. Once they strayed away from Gloriana or her eventual departure, their discussion became much more pleasant.

He quickly queried her about her current work. "How is your variant coming along?"

"I'm at the prototype testing stage. In fact, I was just in the process of tweaking my first prototype, hence my messy clothes."

This was in line with his expectations. It didn't take much time to design a variant, but since this was her first time, he expected her to take it slow.

"How has your prototype fared during the tests?"

"Pretty good. My variant already performed to my expectations in the simulations. The prototype hasn't deviated that much from its theoretical performance. I'm not trying to do anything too fancy for my first attempt."

She declined to say anything else about her work. "I'm sure you can lend a hand, but my variant already incorporates too much of your influence already. While I'm not too picky about that, I don't want your influences to drown out my own."

"That's an admirable sentiment. I've always stressed the importance of figuring out solutions by yourself. When do you expect your variant to be ready for publication?"

"A month, maybe, but not much longer. I've already showed the design to Calsie who thinks it might be good enough to attract some sales. While its demand isn't likely to match any of your mechs, it'll be nice for me to satisfy my first customers."

"I'll look forward to seeing your finished product."

"Don't worry on that front. I've applied all of the lessons you've imparted to me. Some of the woozier stuff you talked about such as mechs being more than lifeless machines has started to make more sense to me now that I'm working on my own project. It really feels like I'm designing my own baby."

Ves smiled. "I'm glad you see it that way. I really do believe your designs will be better off if they receive your love and devotion. It's important to approach

the design process in a focused mindset without any distractions. A muddled mind will only produce a muddled mech design."

Even though he was technically imposing his own ideas on her, Ves truly believed she would be better off if she listened to him on this front.

Chapter 1335 Determinism

Ves ended his call to Ketis on good terms. The worst hadn't happened.

"She'll do fine, regardless if she stays with me or returns to the frontier."

He had hopes for her. Secretly, Ves wanted to keep her by his side despite knowing that she always stated that her main priority was to help the Swordmaidens.

For now, she was in no state to do so. In a decade, she would be completely different. With her enhanced mental attributes, reaching Journeyman should not be a faint possibility.

Even if she failed to pass through the extraordinary threshold, she should at least be a very formidable Apprentice like Ves had been a year ago. That should be more than enough to provide a lot of value to the Swordmaidens.

He sighed and stroked Lucky's back. "The galaxy doesn't revolve around me. People change. Even those I care about will eventually depart from my side."

"Meow."

"Yeah, you're right. Even if she goes back to the frontier, she'll always be a friend and ally of mine. Frankly, it might be best for her development if she tries to make it on her own after learning my lessons. She'll never make it to Journeyman if she keeps depending on me for all kinds of conveniences."

The eventual parting of Ketis did not signify an end to something. Instead, it represented the beginning of a new phase.

With how much connections mattered in the mech community, the personal and professional bond he fostered with Ketis was unbreakable. Whenever Ves wanted something from the frontier, he could always enlist her aid and the aid of the Swordmaidens in order to take care of his errands.

It was much like the bond that Masters shared with their Apprentices. The decision made by Master Olson to withhold extending ties to Ves after she 'graduated' him from her tutelage happened extremely rarely.

In most cases, as long as the younger mech designer wasn't incompetent or got caught committing crimes against humanity, they would always serve as potencies of their former teachers or mentors.

Ves believed his own relationship with Ketis would take the same shape. Not only would she be available whenever he wanted to collaborate with her, they might even be reunited one day.

He shook his head and looked down on Lucky. "Even if the future I envisioned doesn't apply anymore, life isn't a machine. It's foolish for me to think I can design my own life."

"Meow."

"Yeah. Life is full of unexpected setbacks and happy accidents. Nothing is foreordained."

He felt he had gained a very remarkable insight, one that simultaneously resonated and clashed with his design philosophy.

"There is an inherent contradiction with what I'm trying to accomplish." He realized.

Machines weren't born. They were made.

Humans weren't made. They were born.

His design philosophy revolved around the connection between them. In essence, every design project he'd been involved, he paid a great amount of attention to the mech as well as its end mech pilot.

While every mech designer barring eccentrics like the Skull Architect took the end users of their products into account, few went as far as Ves and perhaps Gloriana. Both put the mech pilots central to their designs.

Yet can mech pilots be designed as easily as mechs?

Not really.

That did not mean this posed a problem to him. Yet.

In case of commercial designs, Ves may not be able to model a single random mech pilot accurately, but he could make an overall generalization of his target audience. The Mastery experiences he went through provided him with significant help in this matter.

In case he designed a custom mech, then Ves could easily gather a wealth of information about the sole mech pilot in question.

In both cases, the randomness and variability of mech pilots played no role in the appropriateness of his mech designs.

This was also the reason why he hadn't thought about this contradiction before.

Yet now that he saw his initial plans for Ketis run aground, he developed a notion that the inherent chaos and unpredictability of life should be central to his design philosophy!

"My design philosophy aims to make mechs alive! How can they truly be 'alive' if every aspect about them is under my complete control?"

Running with this train of thought, he thought back on how he started resorting to external means in order to cheat his natural ability.

The spiritual fragments he obtained from various sources empowered his mechs and mech designs to an amazing degree. Yet their accomplishments had little to do with himself. Other than obtaining the fragments and turning them into design spirits, Ves played no other role!

Lucky squirmed and left just as Ves wanted more cuddles. The cat had enough pats and wanted to nap elsewhere!

What just happened between him and Lucky was emblematic of his relationships with his design spirits. They were uncontrollable entities that Ves had borrowed from somewhere but never claimed ownership!

Only now did he realize that he was making use of spiritual fragments in order to compensate for the lack of consideration of the variability of life in his design philosophy!

When he first started working with spiritual fragments, he became enamoured by their possibilities. Instead of relying on artificial images with little life of their own, he achieved much greater results when he resorted to the spiritual remnants of other entities.

The main reason why they appealed to him so much was because of the life these fragments still contained! Life and spirituality were intertwined. One did not exist without the other. Ves had made this realization long ago.

Yet when it came to his design philosophy, Ves thought remarkably little about the balance between what ought to be designed and what should be left to the randomness of life.

"If I want to make mechs alive, does it even make sense for me to design them in the first place?"

Obviously, mechs were machines designed for a specific purpose. This would never change and Ves did not plan on overthrowing this paradigm.

Yet how could he maintain this position while simultaneously recognizing that life was intrinsically uncontrollable that could not be designed?

Ves felt as if a haze of fog cleared up in front of his eyes. For the first time since he advanced to Journeyman, he began to see a possible way forward. Multiple ways, in fact.

He imagined standing on a crossroads. Three different paths leading to three different directions unfolded in front of his inner vision.

Each of them offered a different way of addressing the contradiction between what ought to be designed and what ought to be left to the vagaries of life.

The first and most orthodox path was to adopt the quintessential outlook of a mech designer. Most of those who shared his profession believed that almost every aspect of a mech design ought to be within their control.

A mech designer who couldn't even determine whether his products would turn out well was not a competent mech designer in their eyes!

The very act of designing implied control. Randomness and variability should be minimized in order to achieve as much consistency as possible.

Chance occurrences might lead to happy accidents that resulted in unexpected improvement, but that happened rarely.

It was much more likely than an unexpected event led to a much worse outcome than before. Ves did not find it surprising then that most mech designers looked down on leaving matters up to chance.

"The classical, orthodox mech designer is in complete control over their mech design. As many aspects as possible are under control."

Ves had the notion that a mech designer such as the Skull Architect pursued this path to the extreme. The fugitive's specialty already revolved around

technical performance, and his obsessiveness in maximizing it also meant he detested uncontrollable aspects to an enormous degree.

"This must be why he has such a huge hole in his mentality when it comes to accommodating mech pilots."

He always found it puzzling that the Skull Architect never seriously took the limitations of his target audience into account when designing his mechs.

Now he suspected that it was a side effect from the direction the Skull Architect chose in developing his design philosophy.

In his quest to achieve maximum efficiency and maximum performance, he developed many theories and applications that helped him squeeze out the potential of what he could control.

Yet the mech pilots that were meant to pilot them fell outside his modeling. They didn't have a place in his paradigms at all!

It might even be one of the obstacles preventing him from achieving any further progress in his career.

Ves recalled one of the principles of the MTA. In many instances, the MTA always emphasized that mech designers ought to place themselves at the disposal of the mech pilots who made use of their products.

While Ves could hardly be called a poster boy for the MTA, he recognized that most of their principles were generally sound.

"The reason why the MTA harp so much over this principle is to avoid people like us from becoming arrogant with the power at our disposal."

As mech designers continued to improve, their ability to control and understand every aspect about a mech improved. They gained a rush from their improved control, so much so that at some point they became enamored with the illusion that they were playing god!

Yet mech designers were very much anything but gods!

"A real god is capable of designing lives! Mech designers are nowhere close to that!"

When mech designers forgot that mech pilots couldn't be designed, they pushed themselves onto a very difficult path.

Did this mean that the Skull Architect basically led himself into a dead end?

"Not necessarily." He shook his head. "Nothing is impossible. That's one of the central creeds of high-level mech design. As long as he's innovative and inventive enough, it's not impossible for him to develop a completely new solution that breaks the rules."

Every Master accomplished the impossible to some extent. That was what made them special. Just because the Skull Architect apparently bit off more than he could chew didn't mean he could slowly nibble down his mouthful of food. It would just take a very long time and a lot more effort than usual.

Ves thought of the Skull Architect's circumstances for a reason. That was because the first path, the path of determinism, closely resembled the path the infamous Senior took as well.

Even though the Skull Architect turned out to be an obsessive, single-minded, tunnel-visioned sociopath, his brilliance couldn't be denied. Out of all the Seniors he met, none came across as more driven, passionate and innovative as this daring mech designer!

Yet was this the direction that Ves wanted to pursue as well? He tried to imagine how his design philosophy developed if he tried to pursue determinism, the belief that everything had a cause and that everything could be calculated.

Chaos, free will and random occurrences would become antithetical to his sensibilities. In essence, Ves could easily imagine becoming a control freak like the Skull Architect if he started obsessing over trying to control every aspect of both his life and his mechs!

"That's impossible to accomplish!"

Even if Ves boldly believed that nothing was impossible, he would have to fight tooth and nail in order to achieve significant progress at the later stages.

Just like the Skull Architect, he would likely face a lot of insurmountable roadblocks on his journey to become a Master!

Setting aside the difficulty of pursuing this direction, was it really suitable for him to follow this path in the first place?

He could easily imagine trying to lessen his dependence on spiritual fragments to empower his designs. From the perspective of a mech designer who wanted to be in complete control, a spiritual fragment was too chaotic and random to be relied upon.

Instead, Ves would be better off trying to replace the role of borrowed spiritual fragments with his own version of them. He could pick up his research and development of self-created image.

His goal would be to come up with more sophisticated methods to create images that were as powerful and lifelike as spiritual fragments. However, the key difference here was that while spiritual fragments couldn't be designed, it was different for his images!

"If I pursue this path, would it be possible for me to take it one step further and create life out of nothing when I reach Master?"

That implied that he might actually become a god at that point!

Chapter 1336 In His Blood

Yet... did Ves become a mech designer in order to become a god?

"No." He shook his head. "I never entered this business with the intention of becoming an all-powerful god. I simply became a mech designer because I love mechs."

It was important for him to reaffirm his original intentions. Even if he had changed a lot from his younger, naive self, his endless fascination for mechs never diminished.

Even if he became a mech designer in order to make his own mechs, he never pursued anything more than designing great mechs. Nothing about his intentions demanded him to pursue wild, megalomaniac ambitions such as attempting to create life out of nothing or to become a god.

"Does any of that still have anything to do with mech design?" He frowned in thought.

On the surface, pursuing the path of determinism was all about getting more and more factors under his control. At some point, this inevitably ventured to mech pilots as well, because people were intricately tied to mechs.

"At least.. that's the convention."

One possible direction he could take when pursuing the path to determinism was to cut out any variables that couldn't be controlled.

In his case, that might mean removing the mech pilot from consideration!

"Wouldn't that just be a giant-sized bot?"

Not necessarily. Just because a mech wasn't being controlled by a mech pilot didn't automatically turn it into a bot. What if he attempted to replace the an undesignable mech pilot with another living entity that could be designed?

What if he could make the role of mech pilots redundant by letting the design spirit or a living image take the reins of the mech directly?

"It's like cutting out the middleman." He whispered. "A mech without a mech pilot. Not quite a bot, but not quite a mech either. It would be something new. Something radical. Something so innovative that the entire mech community will call me insane!"

The notion was so bold and unheard of that it instantly ruffled his competitive spirit. A part of him deeply wanted to accomplish the impossible and create something unprecedented!

Fortunately for his sanity, he quickly reined himself in and doused himself with a healthy heaping of reality.

"Just because I can do something doesn't mean I should."

Pursuing this deterministic path implied that he would share the same difficulties as the Skull Architect. While he didn't mind an uphill battle, the outcome had to be worth it and to his liking if Ves wanted to maintain his passion!

He predicted that he would eventually come to change his mind about the role of mech pilots. Rather than see them as an asset to mechs, he would instead come to see them as uncontrollable burdens.

The entire reason why the Skull Architect got chased out of civilization in the first place was that he attempted to have his cake and eat it too. Reno Jimenez thought he found a way to influence some of the uncontrollable factors of his mechs.

Was he wrong?

"Maybe not. Perhaps it made sense in his sick, twisted logic."

Ves was much better off in this regard. The nature of his design philosophy combined with his keen perception and understanding of spirituality meant that he possessed a lot more means of turning the impossible into reality!

Yet just because he could, didn't mean he should.

When he thought about trying to design autonomous mechs that essentially piloted or fought by themselves, he felt very ambivalent about this possible outcome.

On one hand, he deeply admired the courage it took to go against the common consensus and try to develop a true pilotless mech.

On the other hand, he questioned whether mechs that piloted themselves was something that the mech community even needed.

"When mechs run themselves, are humans still necessary?"

He was afraid the answer would be no. What if he became so obsessed with designing a mech that required no human intervention at all that he inadvertently unleashed a new, artificial lifeform? What if these sentient mechs decided to turn against their creators?

Ves deeply feared he might become so obsessed with trying to make this dream into a reality that he might inadvertently unleash another Sigrund onto the galaxy!

While the original developers of Sigrund arrogantly believed they had everything under control, they could never account for all of the variables. Just a small number of accidents resulted in the birth of a horrible sentient AI that potentially had the power to cripple the entirety of human civilization!

"It's a fallacy to believe that someone can control everything! Mistakes and oversights always take place!" He shook his head. "Besides, trying to cut out

the mech pilot from the mech is an ambitious goal, but it's not what I wish to see."

From the beginning, he always put the needs of the mech pilot into account when designing a mech. Why should he minimize or abandon this fundamental principle when it played such a central role to his design philosophy?

"The central purpose of mechs is to serve the needs of its users. Taking a step back, mechs are devices designed to benefit and strengthen humanity!"

Distancing humans from mechs was a philosophically dangerous development because humanity might one day end up fighting against the very tools they created to solve their problems!

These days, humanity rightfully possessed a very dim view on automation. The CFA may be more open-minded on this controversial issue, but the MTA firmly rejected any moves towards introducing more automation into human civilization.

While Ves had no qualms in rejecting the MTA ideas when it suited him, on this issue he was very much on the same side as the overbearing organization.

Humans still needed to be in control of their own lives! Humanity as a whole should still keep a firm grip on their own civilization!

The moment they started farming every task and function to bots and AIs, the human race would cease to innovate and progress!

Ves crossed his arms and closed his eyes. "The MTA is right to prevent the encroachment of greater automation."

In short, Ves rejected any approaches that entailed disconnecting mechs from the people they served.

He imagined himself turning away from the path of determinism. Not only did this road closely resemble that of an unhinged mech designer like the Skull Architect, it also led to an outcome he actually wasn't willing to accomplish.

"I have to pick a direction that more closely aligns to my principles and ideals." He reminded himself.

Two more open paths beckoned to him, though Ves was sure that additional paths existed as well. He just hadn't discovered them as of yet.

He did not consider those undiscovered alternatives yet. He still had to go through his other two choices, starting with the opposite of the previous path.

"If one path leads to absolute control, the other path leads to absolute freedom."

Perhaps freedom was the wrong description. The path of life embraced the chaotic and unpredictable nature of living entities.

Instead of seeing chance and free will as detrimental factors, the path of life instead saw them as intrinsic treasures that empowered mechs beyond their technical limits!

Of course, this did not mean surrendering himself to total chaos. It merely meant that if he tried to make mechs alive, he needed to treat them less like machines and more like actual living entities.

Wouldn't that mean the path of life attempted to pursue something similar to the path of determinism?

Instead of fearing the possibility that his 'living mechs' might run out of control one day, he might as well embrace it if he pursued the path of life!

In fact, to create living mechs that could fully think and act by themselves did not have to turn out into the civilization-ending disaster that Ves and everyone feared.

If he accounted for this possibility beforehand, he might be able to shape mechs into an unassailable ally of humanity.

"Yet.. the same problem that plagues the path of determinism applies here as well. Does the mech market truly ask for living mechs? Regardless of whether they still need mech pilots or not, just allowing them to think for themselves can turn out disastrous if they begin to question the necessity to fight!"

The path of life also introduced another problem. On a more philosophical perspective, how could Ves even 'design' a living mech?

Pursuing a path opposite to the path of determinism essentially entailed diminishing what could be designed. Instead, he would try to pursue the more radical option of leaving it up to chance.

Ves already did some of that when it came to his specialization. Instead of relying on images that he designed by himself, he began making use of external spiritual fragments.

Aside from finding them and extracting them from their former abodes, he possessed remarkably little influence in their future direction. While he could partially influence them by having them absorb some of his images, the spiritual fragments essentially retained full autonomy, especially once they settled into his mech designs as their design spirits.

If he pursued the path of life in a restrained manner, then he could easily see himself trying to expand this methodology and turn it into an essential feature of his mech designs.

If he decided to take a more radical bent in this direction, then he may even attempt to veer away from designing mechs in favor of conceiving them! He could easily imagine himself trying to create organic mechs that started small but grew into formidable giants in their prime!

"That's a step too far."

He didn't feel very enthused about designing organic mechs. Instead, he turned his attention back to the more restrained direction which essentially focused his priorities towards maximizing the use of external spiritual fragments.

Ves imagined that if he pursued the path with a laser focus towards exploiting spiritual fragments, he may one day be capable of many tricks. The existence of his mother in the form of a spiritual ghost hinted that spirituality was capable of doing so much more.

If he invested much of the development of his specialty into this field, he might be able to match or surpass the powers of his mother. In fact, he might even be following in her footsteps!

He widened his eyes. "Perhaps it's in my blood. I just didn't realize it until now."

Would he be able to shed his incorporeal body and live on as an undying spiritual ghost? Would he be able to stave off the inevitable deaths of his friends and family and implant them into mechs or other artificial constructs so that they could live past their natural lifespan?

The temptation of this possibility was so incredibly strong that Ves had to press a firm mental hand onto his mind in order to stop him from making the choice.

"Even if all of that can be done, what does that have to do with mechs?!"

The possibilities he fantasized just then sounded more like something a cultist of the Five Scrolls Compact would pursue! The connection to mechs became a lot more tenuous.

After spending some time to mentally sober himself up, he attempted to look at the path of life in a more critical light.

"The path of life diminishes the role of design. Even if designing mechs is still necessary to some extent, it won't be my focus anymore."

Was that what he really wanted? To treat mechs like a means to an end?

That didn't sound like him. His goal in mech design had always been to make mechs something greater than lifeless commodities!

"I shouldn't take the words 'living mechs' too literally!"

His primary aspiration had always been to make mechs more appreciated. He wanted them to acquire the same intrinsic value as a living human being.

"That does not mean giving them human rights or the capacity to literally live like humans!"

The point of setting this goal was for him to develop a means to empower mechs in a way that made them more useful to their mech pilots. Power shouldn't be pursued for their own ends.

"The path of life is very tempting, but... it will lead me to value the wrong priorities." He concluded.

While he might still develop some of those powers he imagined earlier, they would not be something that ought to be central to his design philosophy.

"As a mech designer, I should not lose sight of my core purpose, which is to design fantastic mechs!"

His current means of using external spiritual fragments to add some extra oomph to his designs shouldn't be seen as a holy grail. Instead, it was just one of many possible tools at his disposal.

Trying to put his focus on spiritual entities instead of mechs was a grave mistake in his eyes. If he really decided to delve into this field, then he might become no different from the likes of Doctor Jutland in the end!

Chapter 1337 The Middle Ground

Having rejected the two extremes of the path of determinism and the path of life, only one more road remained in his mental vision.

The option that remained happened to be the road in the middle. It stretched straight before him as if he'd already been walking on it without even realizing it through all the fog that previously obscured his imaginary sight.

"This is the default choice. The boring choice. The most straightforward choice."

That didn't necessarily mean it was the worst choice. Determining whether this path was best for him or not depended on what he was trying to achieve and how well this direction allowed him to accomplish his goals.

As its placing suggested, the middle path pursued a middle ground between the path of determinism and the path to life.

The extremes of the latter two paths evoked a lot of misgivings to Ves.

He didn't believe in the deterministic ideal that everything could be controlled or designed. Even if Ves pursued this path and reached a point where seemingly everything was in control, reality simply didn't work that way. Life and existence could never be brought under total control, and it would be a grave mistake of him to think otherwise.

He reached a point where he began to think of himself as a god who was capable of designing life, then he might just begin to miss the possibilities that didn't fit into his paradigms!

Much like how the Skull Architect became fundamentally incapable of accommodating his own customers, Ves could easily imagine himself developing similar blindspots!

The path of life came with its own problems as well. It was just as self-centered as its opposite, only expressed in a different fashion.

An overemphasis on the value of life would detract far too much from the design aspect of his profession. Why should he leave everything to chance? Why should he surrender so many aspects to his mechs or the spiritual fragments that formed their spiritual hearts?

The path of life had more to do with the insane experiments of the Five Scrolls Compact than the sober mech design that the MTA espoused.

"I'm not a mad scientist." He affirmed. "Even if what I'm attempting to accomplish is anything but normal, at least I'm better than those deranged madmen!"

The System described his design philosophy as spiritual man-machine symbiosis. It was his specialization while still holding onto his foundational skills.

"It's important to remind myself that I'm still a mech designer. The moment I think of myself as something more than that is the moment I'll lose sight of what I should be working towards!"

His design philosophy was a means to an end, not an end by itself. What this meant was that Ves shouldn't get too hung up over the methods he developed in order to advance his goals.

"Both the path of determinism and the path of life have their good points!"

They also had their pitfalls, and some of them were so deep that they were practically bottomless.

The main point was that Ves did not have an obligation to stay pure on either path. While pursuing them to the extreme might lead to exceptional accomplishments, were they really necessary?

If Ves maintained his sights on designing better mechs, then his enthusiasm for the more extreme paths diminished. Why go down the rabbit holes when there was a perfectly functional slide in the middle?

The middle ground entailed a pragmatic and conscious approach to the development of his specialization. The focus would always remain on spiritual man-machine symbiosis. The description from the System already hinted to him of the importance of balancing out the living and non-living aspects of his work.

"The nature of a symbiotic relationship is that both sides benefit from their association with each other." He reminded himself. "Man and machine. Living and nonliving. Made or born. Everything is in balance. Synergy is the key!"

Why did the inventors of mechs decide to pair humans with mechs? Because they worked well with each other!

Humans by themselves were physically weak but very creative, inventive and devious.

Mechs were awesome machines of war that could unleash a great amount of devastation, but could easily be exploited if controlled by an inflexible AI.

It was a given that the original developers of mechs decided to combine the two. By pairing humans with mechs, they got the best of both while conveniently covering up for each other's weaknesses.

It was a match made in heaven and a winning formula that persisted for over four centuries, so much so that they defined the current era of human history!

While all of this was basic knowledge that each first-year student of mech design learned at school, reiterating it during his state of introspection kept him centered. It helped him maintain perspective and prevent him from giving into temptation.

"I have to make a grounded choice! Passion alone is not enough! It has to align with what I want to accomplish!"

Choosing the middle ground made a lot of sense. By selectively incorporating elements from the path of determinism and the path of life in his design philosophy, he could thread the needle and accomplish his goals without dipping too much into the craziness of both sides.

Of course, in the perspective of the other paths, the middle ground was the craziest path.

"Instead of adhering to a single logic, I'm just mixing and matching bits and pieces whenever it suits me. There's no overarching theory binding them together."

This would probably be his main challenge moving forward on the middle path. By refusing to get carried away by the extreme paths, his understanding of both directions would always be shallow and incomplete. He'd only be able to make use of the more shallow applications of the path of determinism and the path of life.

"There's always a price. I can't have it both ways. I'll be lucky enough to reach my goals at all given how haphazardly I'll sling from side to side when I progress down this path!"

He would have to be very careful and conscious about his subsequent dabblings in the path of determinism, the path of life and all the other paths that he might uncover along the way.

Throughout it all, he needed to find a way to resolve the inherent contradiction he identified earlier and that the purer paths attempted to solve in their own way.

"Both the path of determinism and the path of life offer a solid endpoint."

The path of determinism resolved the contradiction by maximizing the design aspect and minimizing the human element.

The path of life resolved the issue by maximizing the life aspect while minimizing the design aspect.

Meanwhile, the path of the middle ground sought to achieve a stable balance between both aspects.

"In other words, I should just continue to design what can be designed."

As for what couldn't be designed? Leaving it up to the irrational existence of life was no big deal. He just had to maintain at least some direction by selecting the right spiritual fragments or whatever else he might use to breathe life into his designs.

"In a way, it feels like I haven't moved at all."

His decision to take the road he was already inching towards sounded anything but groundbreaking. Yet internally Ves felt he had passed through his first major milestone in his design philosophy ever since he formed his design seed.

He finally found his direction! He was no longer blind and stuck at the starting point because he was unsure of the way forward!

Now that he explored all his options and made a conscious decision, striding forward no longer made him shake in trepidation!

A mental roadmap appeared in his mind, giving him a direction on how to deepen his specialization and expand the capabilities of his design philosophy.

Not only that, but the certainty he felt in his mind also sublimated his design seed to a degree. A mysterious transformation seemed to take place in the

depths of his design seed that configured it in a way to better accommodate his chosen design direction!

His spirituality became invigorated as well, as if it celebrated his evolution of thought!

"This won't be the last time I stumble across a crossroads." He muttered.

From what Ves knew of design philosophies, a mech designer could still shift its direction along the way. Even Journeymen or Seniors could steer their course to some extent depending on the decisions they made along the way.

To Ves, this meant that he could always start leaning more towards the path of determinism or the path of life if he encountered a significant obstacle that made it extremely difficult to push straight forward.

"As the pendulum swings one way, it will eventually have to swing in the other direction in order to maintain balance."

Ves had to take a lot of care in balancing his directions. Leaning too much into the path of determinism or path of life meant he was all but adopting them entirely.

While this wasn't necessarily a disaster that would lead him to a dead end, it still invalidated his earlier choices in favor for the convenience of a path with a simpler but extremely radical narrative.

That was not his choice! His multitude of bad experiences with fanatics and purists who thought that their beliefs were unquestionably right left him with a very bad taste for mindless adherence to a single ideology!

This was one of the driving reasons why he opted for the middle and most pragmatic path.

Though Ves felt very satisfied and self-confident about his choice, a brief sliver of doubt momentarily assailed his thoughts.

It was all well and good to choose the least committed path forward, but how well would he be able to hold his sensible direction when coming into touch with a more radical design philosophy?

"What will happen if my design philosophy interacts with Gloriana's design philosophy?" He asked.

Despite never having studied her design philosophy up close, everything he witnessed so far led him to believe that she chose differently than him. She explicitly pursued perfection, which was very problematic in many ways.

"In theory, our design philosophies shouldn't affect each other's direction. It's the mech designers who hold them that hold the reins."

Nonetheless, Ves didn't believe it was as simple as that, especially when it came to trying to achieve synergy between their specializations. Perhaps at some point they found a way to push their design philosophies to the next level, but only if they borrowed the help of each other.

Ves shook his head. "All of that is way too far away. I should be thinking about myself before adding others such as Gloriana to the equation."

Even if the best results could be achieved by combining the strengths of multiple mech designers in a single design, Ves had to stand on his own before he could think about leveraging synergies.

"I have to walk before I can run."

That meant that Ves had to progress a fair amount before he felt he had the confidence that he could contribute something solid when he and Gloriana finally attempted to collaborate on a design.

As he slowly subsided from his introspective state, he recognized that his perspective on mech design had fundamentally changed.

Although he reaffirmed many inclinations he held before, he also became more open to the idea of borrowing radical elements without dipping too much into the craziness associated with them. He just had to maintain a firm grip on his priorities and his sense of self.

"I am and will always remain a mech designer. Nothing more. Nothing less."

He spoke those words with a greater level of certainty and confidence than before.

As he began to contemplate what he could do to progress his design philosophy in the short term, he began to lean in the direction of the path of life.

Right now, his spirituality was too weak and he lacked the underlying theory to design better images. If Ves wanted a more immediate boost to his mech designs, then refining his utilization of spiritual fragments sounded like a better idea.

"In a way, I've already been doing this to an extent. The only difference now is that I'm more aware of my limits and how far I can go before I cross point of no return."

Chapter 1338 Ves the Altruist

Although on the surface Ves appeared to have suffered a brainfart, he actually experienced a profound enlightenment.

His thinking on mech design grew more sophisticated and structured. The immediate benefit of driving away the fog was that he firmly knew his own place as well as the surrounding landscape of his complicated, multifaceted design philosophy.

Ves never expected to obtain these significant gains after concluding a long overdue talk with Ketis.

"It goes to show that even the most mundane experiences can potentially enrich a mech designer's understanding of their craft."

Such possibilities made it all the more important for people like him to step out of the lab and explore the galaxy.

That Ves gained his enlightenment after something as simple as a conversation with his student also strengthened one of his other theories.

"A mech designer's conduct is indicative of their design philosophies."

He already developed this notion before and encountered various pieces of proof that corroborated it. The only difference now was that he became aware that he could control the direction of his personality change.

"Mech designers such as Professor Ventag and Tristan Wesseling are probably not pursuing anything too extreme." He judged. "They're quite personable and in control of themselves."

In contrast, the more extreme mech designers such as the Skull Architect and Gloriana embraced more radical directions. This in turn reflected back to their personality as they applied their high standards on every other aspect of their lives regardless if it had something to do with mech design.

What did that mean for Ves?

Thinking about his past conduct, he had to admit he hadn't exactly been the most honest kid in the class.

"What are my defining traits?"

Ves did not entirely like what he saw in himself.

The immediate words that came to mind to describe him were deceptive, manipulative, self-serving, reckless and stretching his sanity.

"What does that say about my mech designs?"

They essentially did the same things as he did, if he was being honest. However, since his mechs were generally designed to empower the mech pilot as much as possible, the aforementioned qualities benefited both his mechs and his customers.

His eyes lit up. "This is because of the symbiosis characteristic of my design philosophy! No matter how self-serving my mechs may become, their mech pilots will always benefit as well!"

This simple modifier completely upended his evaluation of his own design philosophy.

No matter what kind of shady stuff he pulled off, it was all fine. That was because his mech design would redeem his sins on his behalf!

"In fact, they've already done so!"

No mech design was more emblematic than this than the Transcendent Messenger. Even if Ves literally desecrated a holy record and even if he only produced six authorized copies of his design, the Ylvainans largely forgave him in the end!

Ves knew that if he continued to design mechs with A-grade X-Factor, he might get accused of trying to unduly influence anyone who interacted with his mechs. Their auras could get very strong and hardly anyone were able to resist their allure.

His critics might even accuse him of outright brainwashing his audience through his mechs! They'd definitely pull in the notorious Farund Affair as an example of how bad it could be when mech designers tried to indoctrinate their mech pilots into becoming their repeat customers!

"Yet... so what?"

What he did was no different from companies trying to appeal to the market by airing advertisements. Plenty of companies turned their marketing activities into a highly manipulative operation that was expressly designed to distort their target audience's emotions and judgement.

Ves just did it on a psionic level in the eyes of his fellow high-ranking mech designers. They would probably feel jealous at him when they found out about his ability to market his products in this fashion!

All of it was for the good of mech pilots, of course. The LMC regularly monitored the satisfaction of its customers, and hardly any buyers felt any remorse over their purchase despite the hefty amount of money they forked over.

While the actual value of his company's mechs relative to competing products still had to be determined over a longer period of time, preliminary signs showed that his mechs already lasted longer than average.

Whether it was because their mech pilots appreciated their machines more, or if the X-Factor significantly improved their effective performance, Ves rightfully felt proud at his work.

"As long as my products benefit my customers, who cares what I do? Anything is permissible!"

Compared to the likes of the Skull Architect, Ves was a lot better off personality-wise. The Senior's fatal flaw was that he became so self-assured in his judgement that he inevitably got caught with one of his misdeeds!

Ves would never make such a mistake again!

Getting caught by the Ylvainan Inquisition had been a very tortuous moment for him. He was lucky that he managed to get out from a potentially fatal situation.

Ever since then, he realized the need for greater caution whenever he did something iffy. He should never become too conceited of himself. Caution, moderation and a certain degree of self-control were necessary for him to avoid following in the footsteps of mech designers who tripped themselves up when they overreached.

"Nonetheless, too much restraint is not a good thing in itself." He muttered while rubbing his chin.

Though he didn't have a handy example on hand, he intuitively felt that managing his passion and enthusiasm for mech design ought to be a critical requirement.

Too much passion and he might go too far in pursuing his goals.

Too little passion and he would lack the drive to persist in pursuing daring opportunities.

"In a way, I have to balance my passion as well." He surmised. "A bit of madness is okay. I just have to make sure it doesn't grow to the point where it lands me in trouble."

In the following few days, Ves set aside all of his work in order to digest his gains. He continued to reflect on himself and his design philosophy. Though everything he did remained locked in the confines of his mind, he vaguely sensed that his design seed had become a little more potent than before.

He could tell, since the spiritual waves it emanated on a constant basis grew twenty percent stronger.

He smiled. "This will probably help me out when I'm ready to design my smart metal tiger mech."

As Ves continued to reflect on himself, he realized that he had neglected to contact someone who had a very strong interest in his decisions.

It had been a long time since he last talked to Calabast.

Ever since he left the Ylvaine Protectorate, most of their interactions happened through their companies and the joint venture they set up. There was hardly any need for Ves to talk to Calabast in person.

In fact, according to her, it would be better if Ves refrained from contacting her too much. They might draw too much suspicion if Ves constantly bugged her for advice.

With seemingly nothing going on that required both of their personal attention, their current business interactions elicited little to no suspicion from others.

Nonetheless, Calabast would probably appreciate being informed of something as sudden and drastic as his plan to embark on a grand expedition.

He tentatively placed a call to her comm.

Two minutes went by before she finally answered it. Her projection appeared in front of him in her mild and unassuming guise of Madame Cecily Curin.

"Mr. Larkinson. I trust you wish to discuss something of importance to me seeing as you attempted to contact me directly."

"I do."

"Is this about your new 'girlfriend' I've been hearing about lately?"

"It's mainly about something else." He replied. "You ehh heard about Gloriana?"

Despite her disguise, Ves sensed the ire and rapprochement in her eyes. Obviously, what she heard hadn't pleased her very much!

"A man like you is destined to go far, but only if you apply yourself and focus on what is important. Dallying with a girl is a dangerous distraction at best and

a security risk at worst. I will not see our business relationship founder because of your ineptness."

Did she really object to his relationship to Gloriana because of those concerns or did she had a more personal reason to object to his girlfriend?

Apparently, she managed to read his thoughts, because she grunted in frustration. "Don't get any crooked ideas, Mr. Larkinson! I am purely indignant because you are potentially putting everything at risk by hooking up with a woman you barely know!"

Though Ves may feel a bit ambivalent about Gloriana, he wanted to push back against Calabast's disapproval.

"Gloriana is a brilliant and talented mech designer who can potentially help me advance even faster." He said, emphasizing her practical use for him. "Our design philosophies are highly compatible. Even if I'm confident that I can eventually advance to Master, many mech designers have made similar statements but came up short in the end."

"You could have chosen someone more trustworthy than Gloriana to hook up with." She spoke. "Hell, even your student Ketis is a much better option because of how much she adores you without any complicated motives that might pose a risk to our business relations."

Ves shook his head. "Madame Cecily, my love life is not your business. Ketis is my student, nothing more. I will not break this rule."

"Since when has that ever stopped you, Bright Martyr? You were quite willing to steal and desecrate the holy relic of our faith." She chuckled darkly.

"It's still wrong!"

Calabast erupted in full-blown laughter, breaking her role as a composed and refined lady of the Curin Dynasty!

"In the one instance where you could have turned your life for the better, you suddenly turned into a goody two-shoes and stuck to this rule that no one cares about! News flash, Mr. Larkinson, romantic relationships between teachers and students are rife in the mech community!"

Ves was like a solid block that stood firm despite all the spit tarnishing its surface. "I've made my choice and I don't regret it. Ketis deserves to be with someone who values her more than I do. While Gloriana is a complicated woman who had brought her fair share of trouble, she's the first mech designer I've met who I feel can truly keep up with me. What's your problem with her anyway?!"

"Everything I've read about Gloriana paints a complicated, tangled picture." She sighed, reining in her anger. "The Wodin Dynasty occupies a prominent place in the power structure of the Hexadric Hegemony. Her relatives are aligned with the Evern Matriarchal Dynasty, who happen to lead the most religious, hardline, aggressive and expansionist faction within the Hegemony."

"I know that. Gloriana herself may have taken on some of those traits, but she's first and foremost a mech designer. Politics doesn't interest her or suit her. As long as they don't interfere with her business, she sees no reason to dabble in that murky swamp."

Calabast smirked at Ves. "I think you have a mistaken impression of your own girlfriend. Her very identity as a young and promising Journeyman Mech Designer has raised value within the Wodin Dynasty. Despite what you think, she's a swamp monster. If you aren't careful, she might grab you and drag you into the swamp!"

Though Ves recognized her good intentions, Ves adored Gloriana too much to be swayed by a mere warning.

"As I've said before, I'm not changing my mind on this matter. I really want to make my relationship with Gloriana work!"

"I'm glad you love me, Ves!"

"What?!"

Ves swiftly turned around as a second projection had quietly formed behind his back! Gloriana's virtual form appeared right behind his back! If she was physically present in his stateroom, then he would have felt her breath on his neck!

"Since when did you get here?!"

Gloriana cockily pressed her hand against her hip. This time she wore a slim and form-fitting business suit that tantalizingly drew attention to her slender form.

"Oh, you silly boy. I've programmed a monitoring routine that records and analyses everything you do, hihi! When my monitoring routine detected that you were talking about me, it notified me. I got here as fast as possible!"

With the level of access she had to the Barracuda despite the ongoing overhaul that Crindon performed on the communication systems, Ves should have taken something like this into account.

Who knew what kind of recordings she made of him while he was on his ship!

Quietly, Ves decided to activate a signal jammer each time he went to the bathroom. It was better to be safe than sorry!

Chapter 1339 Scheming Woman

Ever since Gloriana made her unsolicited presence known, Ves fell in an awkward spot.

The two women immediately held a silent staring contest. Tension flared between the women while Ves awkwardly stood in between them. With

Gloriana's projection leaning so closely against his body, he experienced much of the heat and animosity that Calabast directed towards his girlfriend!

Neither women liked each other!

Ves tried to figure out the signals they sent to each other with their postures and changes in expression, but he failed to decipher their silent communication.

Even if he was capable of interpreting the meows, roars and grunts of many different animals, women happened to be a whole other species!

It was as if he stopped existing in their eyes. Both Gloriana and Calabast only had eyes for each other. Neither relented in their unspoken dominance game.

Eventually, both women slightly averted their eyes.

"Hmph!" Gloriana crossed her arms. "I don't know who this floozy is and what she means to you, but I can tell she's more than she seems."

"You're a very dangerous person yourself, Miss Wodin." Calabast smiled acidly.

Ves nervously waved his arms in an attempt to reduce the tension. "Come on, please. Gloriana, Madame Cecily here is just a business partner."

"The two of you were quite intimate in your conversation!"

"I know more about Mr. Larkinson than you ever will." Calabast taunted, not helping the situation at all!

"Come on! Please stop arguing!" Ves begged.

"SHUT UP!" "The adults are talking right now!"

Ves cringed from the twin rebuke. The two women weren't willing to back down!

After another tense pause, Calabast eventually opened her mouth.

"Let's take this elsewhere. The little kid doesn't need to hear what we have to say to each other."

"My thoughts exactly." Gloriana nodded ardently. "I don't want to show my ugly side towards my boyfriend."

"Uhm, women.."

Both Calabast and Gloriana ignored him and simultaneously activated a comm command that turned their three-way conversation into a two-way conversation.

Ves had been kicked out of the comm call he originally started!

"Damnit! I haven't even told her about my grand expedition yet!"

He had no idea what Calabast and Gloriana were talking about. It might be just like last time when Calabast held a private discussion with Venerable Foster on the Starlight Megalodon.

Hopefully, the outcome would be the same here where the two women agreed to keep the peace between each other.

"Whatever."

Later in the day, Ves received a comm call from Calabast. He accepted it, causing her projection to reappear in front of him. She had fully regained her composure, though Ves sensed some lingering disaffection in her eyes.

"Your proactive girlfriend and I engaged in a very extensive discussion." She began. "While I don't particularly approve of her, she has made it abundantly clear that she is here to stay."

"Okay...?"

"This doesn't change anything between us, Mr. Larkinson. Our current business relations will still continue apace."

Obviously, she hadn't managed to obtain a decisive advantage in her talk with Gloriana.

Deep within his mind, Ves wondered if he could make use of his girlfriend to get rid of Calabast. He hadn't exactly gotten in bed with the spy willingly.

Just as he contemplated the possibility, he quickly brushed it aside. With how careful Calabast must be, she must have prepared for every possible eventuality. Getting rid of her would come at a much greater price than tolerating her meddling.

"So are you cool with Gloriana?" He asked.

She grimaced. "I would not use that term to describe my thoughts on her. Suffice to say, I suppose I can tolerate her. I think she feels the same way about me as I've expressed no interest in competing with her on your affections. Sorry to let you down, kid, but you're not my type."

"I never thought about it." Ves nervously laughed. Whether he was telling the truth, who knew? Right now, he just wanted to avoid any further arguments.

"By the way, did she mention anything about my future plan?"

Calabast. "I've heard. Gloriana was quite willing to rub your supposed 'grand expedition' in my face, especially seeing as she gets to travel by your side."

"So.. what do you think?"

She crossed her arms and eyed him in a critical manner. "I know you well enough that even if some of your decisions are idiotic, you always have a goal in mind. While I don't exactly know why you are so eager to depart to a different star cluster at such a timeframe, I think I can make a guess or two. The answers are already written on your face."

"I guess I can't hide much from you." He nonchalantly shrugged. "The Komodo Star Sector is nice and all, but I think a lengthy expedition to another part of human space will do a lot of good for me for multiple reasons."

"I see that one reason in particular has played a larger role in your decision than the others."

"True. I can't really talk about it on an insecure channel, though. Let's just say that whatever you think is probably true."

"I'll pay a visit to you when you return to the Bright Republic." She nodded in understanding.

They moved on to what would happen if the grand expedition went through.

"I should caution you not to take too much stock in your future predictions." She lectured him. "Your judgement may be wrong. Your sources may be inaccurate. Accidents might happen along the way that can completely upend your plans. You should develop multiple scenarios and be prepared if the worst might happen early."

"I've already taken that into account. I can be quite cautious if I need to be." Ves nodded. "By the way, when I'll be heading off, what will you do?"

"I have my own plans. They are contingent on other conditions which are not present as of yet." She flatly replied. "I don't intend to accompany you on your trip, if that is what you are wondering. Your 'girlfriend' won't tolerate my presence, and I am already occupied with my own ventures."

"So our business relationship will just persist as usual?"

Calabast immediately shook her head. "You're not getting rid of me that easily, Mr. Larkinson. I'll make sure to keep in touch with you in some way. Who knows what kind of decisions you'll make without sound counsel by your side."

"I have Gloriana."

She wordlessly raised her eyebrow.

"Uhh.. yeah. I see what you mean." He sheepishly replied.

"While Gloriana is a capable mech designer, I truly fear what the two of you will do if left to your own devices." She theatrically shuddered in fear as if that was a bad thing! "At the very least, I'll arrange for a more secure means of communication so that we'll both be able to discuss more sensitive matters by remote. Don't discount my value."

Of course she would say something like that. If Ves truly bought the idea that he could replace her with Gloriana, then Calabast would likely teach him a lesson he would never forget!

She was just as scary as Gloriana, but in a different way!

Ves and Calabast turned to other topics after that, but they didn't have all that much to talk about without giving too much away. Gloriana already proved that their comm channel was as compromised as a public toilet.

Even she expressed her frustration at this inadequate communication method.

"If I knew you decided to go on an impromptu tour through the star sector, I would have prepared a more secure means of communication earlier."

"..Sorry."

"I know this isn't your fault. Well, it is, but that's just who you are." She said in an exasperated manner. Dealing with him sure strained her patience! "When you swing close to the Nyxian Gap, don't linger for long. The scum that infests this region are more dangerous than the bottom feeders that lurk in the frontier."

With that, she cut off the call. Ves sighed and collapsed onto his chair. He was glad his talk with Calabast hadn't led to anything more serious.

In addition, while the spy hadn't outright approved of Gloriana, she could probably live with his relationship to the Hexer.

Ves did have an inkling that she was up to something, though. The Calabast he knew had likely concocted a scheme by now to take advantage of his grand expedition.

He wondered how long she would continue to disguise herself as an Ylvainan scion. While Calabast preferred to work in the shadows, her current cover identity became less and less relevant as Ves and the LMC grew stronger.

Calabast would never let him get the upper hand. He just knew she would find a way to become more relevant again. Her current distance and her lack of overt moves did not mean she remained dormant in the shadows.

"I probably did annoy her to no end by springing my grand expedition on her. Much of her plans are probably moot."

If Ves guessed right, Calabast should have been in the process of building a network of spies and informants throughout the star sector. While her efforts were not in vain as long as the LMC maintained a solid presence in the local mech markets, the Komodo Star Sector wasn't indispensable to him anymore.

With another region of space for him to play with, his business in the Bright Republic would inevitably become a background concern for him.

To be honest, Ves had already spent less attention to his business than he ought to. He focused much more on his personal development than the growth of his company.

He knew the reason why. "It's just that there isn't anything pressing to me that requires a lot of money."

That wasn't exactly true. He always wished he had more money so he could buy more goodies. From overpriced exotics that resonated with his design

philosophy, to ships that would make up his grand expedition, he would never run out of something useful to buy.

The issue was that he did not feel particularly deprived of something at the moment. Investing in his ability to design mechs sounded like a much better idea because his earning ability increased significantly as long as he made his mechs a little more attractive.

Considering that the secret of his grand expedition became increasingly shaky, Ves decided to inform other stakeholders of his intentions.

For example, when Ves called his grandfather Benjamin Larkinson, he was met with astonishment and disbelief.

"What is the matter with you, Ves?"

Ves offered a brittle smile. "I didn't plan to leave the star sector either, but there are good reasons behind my move. I would like to think my parents would be proud of me for venturing outside our boring little star sector and see what else the galaxy has to offer."

"Your parents want you to be safe."

Ves pointedly looked in his grandfather's projection in the eyes. "That is true."

Hopefully, his grandfather received his implicit message.

"I.. see." The older Larkinson eventually said. "I can't say I'm happy about your decision, though. While I'm very glad to hear you finally have a girlfriend and a very impressive one at that, I'm not enthused at the thought of seeing my great-grandchildren grow up in the form of projections."

Seeing Benjamin acting so melancholic all of a sudden prompted Ves to make an impulsive decision.

"How about.. coming with me?" Ves suggested. "There should be enough room on the fleet that I'm preparing for the grand expedition to accommodate

the entire Larkinson Family. I don't mind bringing you and any other Larkinson who wants to experience a change of scenery along. I'm already planning on bringing much of the Avatars of Myth with me anyway."

The offer did sound intriguing to Benjamin. "If I didn't have so many responsibilities right now, I would have said yes. I'll keep your offer in mind. Ask again when you are about to embark. Perhaps I'll be a retired old man by then. I'm already getting on in years anyway."

Chapter 1340 Redwell Province

After his fruitful talk with his grandfather, Ves felt a lot better about himself.

His grandfather expressed tentative approval of his intention to spend his time in another star cluster.

As long as the expeditionary fleet had room for Benjamin and a number of other Larkinsons who were willing to depart from the Bright Republic, the Larkinson Family wouldn't object to the absence of Ves at home.

He could leave the Bright Republic without too much guilt. He wouldn't be leaving the Larkinson Family and most of his friends and family hung out to dry.

After he finished with his calls, he turned back to the present. After almost two months of constant travel, the Chuko Republic finally came within reach.

Ves had been looking forward to visiting the Chuko Republic, though Gavin was much less enthused with the decision.

"Well, I can't blame my assistant. Chuko is definitely in a mess right now."

Sitting squarely in the middle of three states, none of which were friendly, the Chuko Republic's sovereignty no longer stood on solid ground.

Piracy and attacks by unidentified forces frequently plagued the border regions of the state. The constant raids became so pervasive that most

shipping traffic to the periphery of Chuko practically ceased. Aside from large, extremely well-protected relief convoys, most of the outlying planets were basically left to fend for themselves!

Closer to the heartland of Chuko, the provincial governments held sway. Since the central government grew increasingly feeble and less capable of securing the safety of its territory, its three provinces gained increasingly more sway in the lives of the average citizens.

The situation was analogous to that of the Vesia Kingdom where their royal house were no longer able to control the powerful ducal houses that held most of the power.

"There are still a couple of differences, though." Ves murmured.

The Chuko Republic's government showed some signs of recent revival after a new leader came into power.

Having seen the writing on the wall, President Dominic Qkwanve enacted a wide sweep of reforms as soon as he assumed his office.

Predictably, he ruffled a lot of feathers in his attempts to clean up the rot and strengthen the state. The provinces weren't happy. Its greedy neighbors weren't happy. Many other stakeholders inside and outside the state would lose out as well if the reforms came to pass.

Yet did the Chuko Republic have any choice at this point? With dwindling trade, frequent slaughters, destructive mech battles, fleeing citizens plaguing the state, everyone could tell it was on a downward spiral.

"President Qkwanve just has the courage to make a serious attempt at reversing this trend."

Too bad it came too late. Every news article on the galactic net predicted that the Chuko Republic had already passed the point of no return.

With so much awful news coming out of the Chuko Republic, a lot of people around him expressed surprise that he would want to visit the failing state. Was Ves out of his mind?

He smirked. "The Chuko Republic is a state that is about to burn the brightest before it inevitably falls. The desperate events I'll be able to witness will definitely be worth the risk."

He had other motives in mind when he visited the state as well. Despite all the restrictions holding sway over the local star systems, Ves hoped to pick up some bargains from the dying state.

Perhaps he might be able to pick up promising but persecuted mech designers. Maybe he could hire more remarkable mech pilots like the Ingvars who were looking to leave their deteriorating factions.

Plenty of Chukans were already in the process of moving their people and assets elsewhere. Though Ves didn't expect to obtain a share of the good stuff, who knew what treasures might come into possession just by being in the right place at the right time.

The only concern of his was to manage his risk and avoid veering into regions of space with acute security risks.

Fe Nitaa requested a meeting with Ves to discuss this very topic.

"Do you know if the Order of Fl'xix has any friends in the Chuko Republic?"

"I can't say." His tall bodyguard replied. "The Chuko Republic is rife with different organizations, many of which are infiltrated or outright fronts for various foreign influences. According to my research, this problem is so pervasive that a single hidden influence can hardly do anything because it will inevitably bump into all of the other hidden influences."

The subtext here was that even if the Five Scrolls Compact maintained a front organization within Chuko, they shouldn't be very powerful.

Nitaa was right that other foreign influences likely held more sway in the faltering state. The Hegemony-aligned Hinsen Protectorate, the xenophobic Traditional Tribe and the Vicious Mountain-related Phantasm Republic each wanted a piece of Chuko, and didn't want to share their spoils with others!

"Okay, then. I guess we should worry more about the other factions."

"Of them all, the Hinson Protectorate is probably the one that is most inclined to respect us." Nitaa spoke. "Since it borders the Hexadric Hegemony, Hinson's ties with the second-rate state is deep, and it's often considered as an informal potency of the Hexers. Considering your relationship with Gloriana, their forces in Chuko should steer well away from you. The last thing Hinson wants to see is pissing off your girlfriend and by extension the Wodins!"

That was one of the benefits of having a powerful girlfriend. Ves did not feel any shame in taking advantage of her status and wielding it like a club to further his goals.

"What is not so certain is our ability to remain on the good side of the Redwell Province." She continued. "Governor Alinc detests the Hegemony because they indirectly enable the aggression of the Hinson Protectorate."

Governor Alinc ruled the Redwell Province located on the upper slice of the Chuko Republic. Further upwards sat the Hinson Protectorate, which in turn bordered the southern side of the massive Hexadric Hegemony.

Just like the Kamon Republic's relationship with the Fridaymen, the Hinson Protectorate had turned into the playground of the Hexers. A lot of investment and other economic activity took place between the two disparate states.

Though Hinson hadn't signed any formal treaties with the Hexers denoting its status as their vassal state, everyone and their mother knew that the two possessed very friendly ties.

Naturally, that didn't mean Hinson got to throw around their weight by virtue of their powerful backer.

Unlike Ves who knew that Gloriana didn't mind that he took advantage of her status, the Hinson Protectorate had less options. The ambitious state wasn't allowed to leverage its good relations with its powerful neighbor to its diplomatic advantage.

Otherwise, who knew if the Hinson Protectorate completely went off the rockers and started to provoke a suicidal war against the Friday Coalition!

For this reason, the second-rate states maintained a distinct degree of separation between their neighboring third-rate states. The Coalition and the Hegemony both cultivated beneficial ties with the small fries, but never allowed them to dictate their foreign policies.

In fact, states like Hinson had to restrain their behavior even further! As an unofficial vassal of the Hegemony, any move they made reflected back on their big brother!

This left the Hinson Protectorate in an awkward position. It sensed a lot of weakness in the Chuko Republic and already started to eye its Redwell Province.

Yet it wasn't really allowed to attack another state while it was so intertwined with the Hexers.

Without the possibility to act in the open, Hinson instead sought an alternative means to conquer the Redwell Province.

What if the Redwellers wanted to secede from the Chuko Republic and voluntarily apply to join the Hinson Protectorate?

Ordinarily, such an occurrence should have been impossible. The Chuko Republic stamped out every element that advocated for defection.

Yet.. the brutal suppression in the open only drove the seditious talk underground and behind closed doors. A significant proportion of Redwellers secretly hankered for stability. They didn't care whether they paid taxes to the Chuko Republic or the Hinson Protectorate.

What they really cared about was being ruled by a strong and secure state that ensured that everyone's lives would improve in the future!

Currently, the frail and increasingly powerless Chuko Republic failed to deliver the safety, security and prosperity its citizens expected of their government!

Informally, the citizens that supported defection were called Whitewellers.

This was because their detractors believed the traitorous Chukans were proverbially raising the white flag in surrender!

Instead of sticking to their home state through its most difficult time, the Whitewellers would rather give up their entire identity and culture!

This was an incredibly serious betrayal to the Chuko Republic!

The more fanatical Chukans who were diehard supporters of the Chuko Republic or the Redwell Province always butchered the Whitewellers whenever they uncovered them. The more ardent loyalists of the Redwell Province became known for engaging in many violent incidents!

News reports of lynchings, witch hunts and pogroms regularly littered the regional news. The radical Redwellers, often hiding their identities behind red hoods or masks, were subsequently Bloodwellers!

The reason for their name should be obvious.

To their credit, the extreme acts perpetrated by the Bloodwellers successfully frightened many neutral Redwellers from joining the Whitewellers.

The Bloodwellers also rooted out many Hinson spies and infiltrators that attempted to sow chaos and division in order to boost the Whiteweller cause!

"The population of the Redwell Province is bitterly divided between the Whitewellers and Bloodwellers." Nitaa grimaced. "Both groups are violently at odds with each other, though the latter are particularly rabid. The entry of foreigners like us in their province will be met with a lot of suspicion by the Bloodwellers. Your association with the Hexadric Hegemony is very toxic in the Redwell province."

Despite her words, Ves merely stretched his arms behind his back and leaned into his chair. "The Chukans won't dare to do anything to me. Even the Bloodwellers know better than to touch my hair."

She couldn't quite believe what she heard. "That does not protect you against threats from the dark! There are plenty of interest groups who would love nothing more than to assassinate you! If something happens to you in Redwell space, the local situation will definitely be inflamed! The Wodin Dynasty might even push the Hinson Protectorate to be more overt in their attempts to take over the Redwell Province, thereby giving the Hinsoners and the Whitewellers exactly what they want!"

In other words, the Hinsoners and the Whitewellers may possibly be plotting to kill him in order to advance their political cause!

These were exactly the groups that Ves wanted to engage! He especially eyed the Whitewellers as possible targets for recruitment and other business!

"We'll just have to manage the risks carefully." He reiterated. "With you and Lucky by my side and the Battle Criers covering us with their mechs, any

attackers will have to think twice. They'll be in huge trouble if they become exposed."

"That still leaves way too many options to attack you, sir. Their motives for doing so are very strong."

Ves nodded in agreement. "This is why the key is to stick to Redwell's Provincial Government. While they are sympathetic towards the Bloodwellers, they won't dare to pull off any shenanigans. Inflaming the situation is not in their best interest."

He had to admit it sounded like a mess. While public security hadn't deteriorated to the point where assassinations were rife, Ves didn't dare to enter the Redwell Province without a hefty escort.

Fortunately, the strength of the Battle Criers should be enough to deter most outfits from seeking trouble with him. In addition, he was confident he could navigate the complicated web of Whitewellers, Bloodwellers, Chukans and Hinsoners.

In his eyes, the Chuko Republic was already becoming as murky as the frontier. The key to surviving in the frontier was to make at least some friends who could cover his back.

After studying various options, Ves decided to approach a particular mech designer in Redwell Province.