

Chapter 1451 Key Driver

"I know what you all are thinking!" Ves addressed the stunned crowd. "We third-raters will never be able to reach Master. It's pointless to set unattainable goals for ourselves. Fridayman and Hexer mech designers enjoy too much of an advantage on this front. All. Of. This. Is. Correct. Yet even if that is true, so what?!"

His amplified words echoed across the entire auditorium. Whatever the attending students expected to hear, this was nothing like they had ever heard before! Not a single guest lecturer ever approached their presentation from this direction!

"Mech designers are capable of achieving the impossible." Ves spoke. "It is the reason for our existence. When have we ever given up and surrendered to the prevailing odds?!"

A sense of rebellion grew in the hearts of the Rawlings students.

"Those of you who were brave enough to raise your hands, I salute you! Your courage and conviction is admirable! As for those who didn't raise your hands, do you think my disappointment in you is justified?"

Although the pressure that Ves emanated made it difficult for the audience to speak out against him, the Seniors among the professors were made of sterner stuff.

One of the older figures stood up, drawing some of the crowd's attention away from Ves.

"Mr. Larkinson, though we respect your opinion, the mech industry is inherently shaped like a pyramid. For every Master in the star sector, there are countless lesser mech designers who have been left in the dust! It is not

responsible for you to paint an overly-rosy picture of how likely our students are able to advance to Master!\

Ves held back the snarky retort that bubbled within his mind. He was not facing a heckler who wanted to spoil his moment. The professor merely expressed genuine concern that Ves was distorting the perspectives of his students.

It would do no good to convince the Rawlings students that they were all destined to reach Master!

A noticeable pause ensued as Ves formed a more respectful response. This was not the time to wag his inner Devil Tongue!

\\"Professor, I understand your sentiment. However, please consider the other side of the coin. Is it really so bad to aim for the top? When you set an impossible goal but fail to meet it, will you truly be considered a failure? You were one of those who didn't raise your hand, right?\"

\\"Correct. I know my limitations. At my advanced age, the gap to Master is still too vast. Senior is the extent of what I can achieve in my lifetime.\"

Ves nodded. \\"You are old. You don't have much time left to overcome the challenges standing in the way for you to reach the next rank. But what about when you were young? Did you imagine yourself that you'd become a Senior when you just finished your graduation?\"

\\"I... back then I was a lot more hopeful.\" The professor admitted. \\"I have to admit that I'd probably be among the students who raised their hands if I was a century younger.\"

\\"Good! That's good! You had ambition back then! Think about what you thought back then and what you managed to achieve up to today. Are you disappointed at the progress you've made over your career?\"

The professor instantly answered with conviction. "No. I'm proud of what I've accomplished. I may not have what it takes to become a Master, but I am more than satisfied with reaching the height of Senior. It is more than what many of my former classmates achieved."

"This is my point!" Ves grinned at the audience. "Setting an impossibly high goal for yourselves is not always a bad thing, especially for mech designers like us! Normally, people are advised to set achievable goals. That doesn't work for us! We are mech designers! The best of us have never abided by existing limitations! Even if each and everyone of you who raised your hands have been unable to reach your lofty goals like the professor here, is it really so bad if the journey you've gone through has already brought you further than you ever imagined?"

More and more of the crowd began to become illuminated to the point that Ves tried to make.

"Ambition! Ambition is the key driver of every profession! It is even more important to mech designers because only driven mech designers are worthy mech designers! The market does not accommodate average mech designers who are too timid to publish a mech that deviates from the existing products in the markets!"

Though Ves had not cleared the topic of ambition with Professor Nxi for his guest lecture, he really wanted to address it first.

This was because ambition formed the foundation of his principles!

Ves raised his arms and snapped his fingers. The main projection that depicted moody scenes of war instantly shifted to depict inspirational scenes of Masters presenting their greatest works!

Achieving the impossible!

Breaking the rules!

Conjuring miracles!

Masters were some of the most amazing mech designers in the galaxy! Only Star Designers had the right to stand above them, but even Ves did not dare to dangle the dream of reaching the very top of the mech community to the Rawlings students!

Nonetheless, to everyone living in the Komodo Star Sector, to become a Master was to fulfill the ultimate dream that every mech designer harbored in their hearts. Some just entertained it a bit more openly than others.

"Although it's a cheesy saying, I will say it nonetheless. The journey is more important than the destination. It's fine if a hundred years later your career ends at Senior, Journeyman or even Apprentice! This is because if you have earnestly tried to follow your ambitions, you have squeezed out every bit of potential that is present in your bodies and minds!"

Ves stoked every student's aspirations with his inspiring words. Though his starting direction confused them a bit, now his words truly made sense!

This was what he believed! As long as mech designers pursued their ambitions, they would be able to reach the utmost of what they were capable of! Perhaps one of two of the students here might be able to break the seemingly-impassable ceiling and become the first mech designer of the Sentinel Kingdom to advance to Master!

Once Ves provided enough time for every student to process the implications of his words, he chopped his arm, causing the main projection behind him to disappear.

"Ambition is important, but realizing all of your potential is harder than it sounds."

The guest lecture took a sober turn now that Ves no longer attempted to steer the moods of his audience with any footage.

It was just him and his words right now.

"Some of you want to become an independent mech designer. How great is it to set your own agenda, decide the direction of your own design projects and earn most of the proceeds of the sales of your own mechs?"

Every mech designer aspired to start their own mech companies due to these exact same reasons. It also helped that independent mech designers also enjoyed the most regard in the mech community!

"It's a big step to take. Despite my earlier words, don't be too reckless and pile yourself up with debt in an attempt to found a successful mech company. There are multiple ways to realize your potential. I've met many mech designers who worked for the military or other organizations who have achieved just as much as those who struck out on their own."

If Ves didn't mention these words, Professor Nxi would probably be pissed at him for encouraging a lot of overeager students into starting their own businesses. No matter their ambitions, most simply didn't have the capability to succeed in their ventures!

However, right now, Ves focused on those who both aspired to become an entrepreneur and had the means to go through with their plans.

"As for those who want to become the founder of a thriving mech company, your path is the hardest but arguably also the most rewarding one to follow. Whether it is the correct decision for you to invest so much time, effort and money into founding a new mech company, that is up to you. I would merely like to elaborate a bit on the many challenges you'll face when you start off on your own."

He began to explain the common problems facing every mech designer who wanted to compete in the market.

He explained the difficulty of competing in an oversaturated mech market where the products designed by Journeymen and Seniors outright crushed their pathetic first mech designs in both performance and value.

"...With so many superior mech models for sale, why do you think you deserve a place in the market? You're in your twenties. Perhaps younger if you're some kind of genius. Even then, no matter how brilliant you are in your studies, what gives you the right to convince some of the buyers in the market to opt for your early, poorly-designed mechs?"

The question echoed across the entire auditorium.

A professor couldn't take it any longer and stood up. "Our younger generation of mech designers represents the future of our mech industry. They deserve an opportunity to spread their wings."

"That is a societal benefit, but is it in the interest of the people who make use of mechs to opt for primitive products over more refined and better-designed alternatives?"

The professor wasn't stupid. He responded with the right answer.

"If mech designers aren't able to match the quality outputted by the market leaders, then they are still able to find a place in the market by pricing their products lower."

"I agree." Ves nodded with a smile. "This is what I did when I started out as well. Just like any other new entrant in the market, I started off with selling variants of existing mech designs. While the quality of my products is far from impressive, I nonetheless managed to keep my head above the water by pricing them low enough that at least a small portion of customers think they are getting a good deal."

The audience did not appear very impressed with such a humble start. Trying to compete by price did not sound as exciting as trying to compete over the features of their mechs!

Ves deliberately lifted his gaze towards the audience and scoffed.

"Do you think that the independents among you won't start out like this? I'll be honest. The earliest mechs I've sold are ripoffs of dubious value to the mech market. However, I'm not ashamed. This is what I had to do to survive the early days."

As he silently tried to gauge the mood of the audience, he still detected too much complacency among the students.

No wonder Professor Nxi mentioned that too many Rawlings graduates failed when they attempted to start their own businesses!

"I'm sure that some of you think you have your future all lined up for you." He spoke. "How many of you are nobles?"

A considerable amount of hands rose up. While they only represented a small fraction of the total amount of students attending his guest lecture, they also had the highest proportion of mech designers aspiring to start their own business!

In truth, the mech company they planned to found in the future would be mostly owned by their noble houses instead of themselves. To the established aristocratic order, adding a successful mech company to their portfolio was a great way to expand their earnings, influence and internal production capabilities!

"I don't have the statistics on hand, but in the Sentinel Kingdom, how many of you noblemen mech designers actually succeed in founding a successful and profitable mech enterprise?"

The answer was not much. Despite the considerable amount of investment poured into the startups of these noble scions, in the majority of the cases, they still failed!

This was a huge problem that not only plagued the noble students at Rawlings, but all the other mech design universities in the Sentinel Kingdom and in other states!

Just because someone was born with a silver spoon in their mouth, didn't mean they were better than someone who was born with a regular spoon in their mouth!

The more fortunate mech designers just enjoyed more allowances for failure!

Chapter 1452 Dismal Survival Rate

To be honest, Ves did not possess that much exposure with regards to the running of other mech companies. He only vaguely kept track of the rise and fall of the ventures of other mech designers when he spent some time on an industry news portal.

What he was teaching right now to the Rawlings mech design students ought to be part of the businesses courses in their curriculum.

However, even if they already learned these lessons in class, Ves believed that it might be different when it came from the mouth of someone who recently went through the startup process.

"Starting a mech company to compete in a market environment that is already flooded with the products you want to introduce is difficult. Immensely difficult." Ves smacked his hand against his palm in emphasis. "The basic question that should be roiling in your heads as you invest a fortune in a mech workshop or a larger production facility is what value you are bringing to the table. What distinguishes your mechs from the mechs designed by people

who are older, more skilled, more experienced, more famed and more entrenched in the market?"

Some of the students began to absorb his words. They were getting absorbed in his train of thought.

However, many others still remained unaffected. The lesson wasn't catching on to them, either because they had no intention of going independent or they possessed too much confidence in their abilities.

Evidently, Ves had to work harder to pop the bubbles surrounding the latter group of students.

"In the mech market, the bigger fish such as the Journeymen, Seniors and the huge trans-galactic enterprises already capture the bulk of each product segment. The good news is that Novices and Apprentices are still able to earn a decent living between the cracks. The bad news is that the amount of Novices and Apprentices competing over these tiny spaces in the market is enough to form a new black hole! Can you imagine such a sight?"

The strange analogy sure caught the attention of a few more students.

"Maybe I should put it in clearer terms. Imagine a round pie where a dozen Seniors each divide the cake equally between each other. They've cut the cake so well that only crumbs are left behind. Now imagine you, the other students in this hall and multiply that by a thousand fighting over the crumbs that can barely fill your belly, let alone stimulate your taste buds! Does that sound great to you? Does that seem easy to you?"

The gravity of the dire situation of startups became more evident when put in this way.

Ves smirked. "Certainly, the crumbs of the pie is actually enough to sustain plenty of mech companies during their startup stages, but there is only so much hunger they can sate. Imagine all of you Rawlings students competing

over a single crumb. Who gets to decide which mech designer gets to pop this crumb in their mouth?"

He pointed at a random mech designer!

"You?"

He shifted his finger towards another mech designer?

"Or you?"

He let out a laugh.

"The mech market isn't a lottery. Relying on random chance won't secure a place in the market for you and your business venture. You have to fight for it! Now, some of you may think that you are beyond such concerns because you enjoy advantages that others don't. Perhaps your family or noble house is willing to dump a lot of money on you. Perhaps you have a generous mentor who is willing to prop you up."

Quite a number of mech designers nodded as they did indeed enjoy certain advantages.

"Well, while enjoying solid backing guarantees that you can get a foot in the door, entering the building is another matter! The inside of the building is already bursting with other mech designers, and it is extremely selective of which mech designer is allowed to enter! Backing means nothing if your products and your mech design abilities are merely average!"

For emphasis, Ves raised his hands. The main projection came to life again. Unlike the vivid footage from before, now the projection depicted several choice statistics in the form of giant graphs and tables.

Every mech designer was versed in statistics. They each took in the statistics and grimaced.

This was because Ves chose to project the figures of the survival rate of mech company startups in the Sentinel Kingdom in the last couple of decades!

Not only that, but he even chose to depict a graph that displayed the success rate of mech companies founded by mech designers of different backgrounds.

All of the figures were abysmally low and all of them reached the single percentages!

The other notable finding of this graph was that the background didn't matter!

Mech designers with an ordinarily middle-class commoner upbringing succeeded just as much as those born with silver spoons in their mouths!

While there were some mild variations in the success rate of each different category of mech designers, the differences weren't statistically significant!

"I'm not sure whether your teachers have shown you this graph before, but I'm showing you this now because these are the results of your predecessors. Many of them were like you, confident and conceited in the belief that you are special and that you will definitely succeed where others have failed. While confidence is important in pursuing your ambition, never think that successful mech designers are exempt from failure! Which Senior or Master haven't suffered major setbacks in their careers?!"

He swept his hand specifically towards the professors sitting in the front, causing some of them to color a bit. Nonetheless, those like Professor Nxi who had been through many experiences in their lives took the renewed attention in stride.

This was because Ves was right. Every Senior went through at least one major setback, and often more.

"This is the nature of our profession and the nature of the business environment we live in! The market for mechs is humongous and enormously

lucrative! Yet all of the money circulating in our industry has brought out the highest degree of competitiveness of all of the existing players in the market! New entrants in the market such as you won't fare well if you underestimate the competition and overestimate your own capabilities!\

One particular student managed to summon up enough resistance to raise his hand!

\\"Mr. Larkinson!\" The young man interrupted Ves. \\"Why do you keep talking us down?! Do your earlier words about setting impossible goals mean nothing?!\\"

Ves applauded at the man. \\"Good question! I don't have the habit of contradicting myself! I mean what I say and my earlier lesson to you is still valid! While ambition is important to bring out the best in us, self-assessment is arguably even more important! The former deals with your aspirations of the future while the latter is relevant to what you can do in the present!\\"

\\"What do you mean, exactly?!\\"

\\"What a mech designer achieves in the future and what they are able to do in the present differs immensely.\" Ves spoke calmly. \\"The challenge to each and every one of you is how well you can bridge this gap. No amount of wishful thinking will allow you to magically overcome the obstacles in the way. It takes an honest assessment of your options and capabilities as well as realistic decision-making to achieve significant progress. This is the quality that most mech designers lack when their startups falter.\\"

The student who spoke up had sat down by now. He and everyone else followed his train of thought.

\\"As the graphs behind me show, the commoners among you have just as much chance to succeed than the more fortunate sons and daughters among you. In my opinion, this is because of two reasons.\\"

He raised one finger.

\\"First, the independent mech designers with a common background are only able to attract investment because they set a bold vision and have the competence to back up their ambitions. They also know that they are good enough to compete over the less-fought niches in the market and go through with taking risks in the belief that their mech company can succeed!\\

He raised another finger.

\\"Second, the independents among you with access to easy money and powerful backing frankly overestimate the role these advantages grant you! All the money and connections in Sentinel won't help you sell more mechs if you suck! Forget your pride and birthright for a moment and make an honest assessment of yourselves! If you aren't ranking in the top of your classes, what makes you think you will make it past the stupendously high cut-off point of the brutal mech market where you are competing against mech designers who are vastly more competent than your classmates?!\\

The mech market wasn't fair! Huge trans-galactic enterprises headquartered in the galactic center regularly publish stupendously-optimized and nearly flawless mech designs that capture the bulk of the galactic mech market!

The smaller the mech designer, the less chances they had to survive on their own!

\\"The true worth of a mech designer is locked within yourselves.\\\" Ves tapped the side of his head with his finger. \\"Your design abilities are the basic foundation that determines your right to capture one of the crumbs of the pie.\\\"

Ves then swept his hand up in the air!

\\"However, this is not enough! It is not enough to be decently good at designing mechs! You also have to present something of value to the mech market! This is where the ambition I spoke about earlier comes in! Maintaining

a foothold in the market requires you to prove that your mechs are sufficiently different from the competition! If you fail to differentiate, then what gives you the right to capture the market share claimed by more established rivals? As long as they can do the same as you do but ten times better, there is no reason for your mech companies to exist!\

Ves gestured towards one of the professors who spoke out earlier during the guest lecture.

\\"One of your teachers mentioned that competing by price is a valid way of surviving in the mech market. But that is barely enough for you to maintain a meager and barely profitable existence. I don't think any of you with aspirants to become independent are okay with settling for a marginal existence! To grow your mech company and attract more sales, differentiation is the key. Only by releasing unique products that showcase your distinct specialties will you be able to get past the startup stage and become a major force in the market!\\"

His words tied into the subject of ambition that Ves brought up earlier.

\\"Boring ideas won't cut it in the mech market. The mech market is already filled with mechs designed in the lines of almost every standard design philosophy out there. This is why it is important to be bold and ambitious in setting your goals! Only by developing a novel, exciting design philosophy will you be able to justify why you deserve a place in the market!\\"

Competing over price was a dead end as far as Ves was concerned!

\\"Of course, this is easier said than done. Some of you have the capability to do well, but not the ambition to guide your growth. Others have the ambition, but not the capability. If they failed to assess themselves honestly, they will just join one of the many failures projected onto this graph. As for those who

possess neither the capability or the ambition, I'm sure they know themselves well enough that they have no place on the market."

This was why it was important for the students to reflect on themselves before they embarked on life-changing career decisions.

Ves could tell that his words had truly caught on by now! A lot more mech designers began to fall into thought as his lesson encouraged them to look at themselves.

Not everyone liked what they saw.

Chapter 1453 Career Options

Ves structured his lecture to achieve several goals. Alongside hitting the points that Professor Nxi wanted him to address, he also snuck in another objective.

Right now, he was slowly building up to that point.

"The market isn't fair and so isn't life." Ves continued his lecture. "To become an independent is not the best solution for everyone. The risks are too high and so is the price. Becoming a dependent may not be the most prestigious direction you can take in your career, but plenty of Masters have emerged after building up their competences by working for the military or a great mech company."

Ves waved his hand, causing the statistics projected above him to disappear.

"The reason why I hammer the need to assess your strengths and weaknesses is because only by knowing where you stand will you know what you need to stand on your own. If you blindly proceed to start your own business without knowing you are bad at mechanics for example, all of your mechs will be far too shoddily put together to be worth purchasing!"

He had witnessed far too many marginal mech designers who barely eke out an existence from a single mech workshop. He did not want the students here

to enter the market with hopeful ideas, only to end up as a zombie in the brutal mech industry.

"Cherish your time at Rawlings. You only have a set amount of years to build up your foundation. The competences you acquire during your studies here determine the starting point of your career in the mech industry. Now, those of you who have done well and are capable of doing more won't have anything to worry about. As for those of you with average grades, I'm sorry, but you just won't cut it if you start off on your own. The difference between you and those with better results is that the latter is much more capable of differentiating their products!"

When Ves tied the academic results of the students to the chances of succeeding in becoming an independent, he brought the lesson much closer to home!

While the academic workload of Rawlings was quite high compared to more standard mech universities, most students were able to keep up due to passing through the strict selection process.

Yet keeping up was not the same as excelling in their studies! Only a portion of them truly took to their courses like fish to water! For everyone else, achieving higher-than-average grades was already a win in their books!

However, in the majority of the cases, the level of determination and learning ability demonstrated by the average students simply didn't cut it! When they finally tried to make something of themselves in the mech market, they would probably wish they exhibited a lot more drive and urgency in making the best of their time at Rawlings!

As Ves kept painting a bleaker picture with his words, he finally offered a form of salvation.

"This is not the end, though. Far from it. Mech designers are needed everywhere. Rawlings students such as you are unlikely to be demoted to fabricators, repairers or any of the other side professions related to mechs. The government, military and existing mech companies all have a need for diligent mech designers who can dutifully fill up their design teams."

Numerous Rawlings students definitely appeared to be considering their plans. Ves had managed to convince at least some of his audience to reconsider their ill-thought plans to start their own mech companies.

He smiled. "Is becoming an independent the end of a mech designer's career path? Far from it! There is nothing wrong with borrowing the strength of a stronger employer to overcome your shortcomings. The only thing you need to take into account is that you only have so much time to progress and make something of yourself!"

A mech designer could never have enough time!

"From what I've found out, the employment prospects of Rawlings graduates is excellent. The reputation of your school is deservedly high and each of you who pass all of your courses are well-prepared to perform all kinds of starter work. As long as your academic record is decent, I'm sure you can choose between plenty of employers, all of which offer different conditions and incentives for you to join."

Ves paced around the podium. "However, the question here is which employer is the best? The military is often seen as the best employer because they provide a lot of support. However, they only employ the best, so it is not that easy to enter their circle. It's easier to join one of the many mech companies looking to bolster their design teams, but this is where you need to set your priorities straight."

He stopped pacing and faced the center of the audience in a dramatic turn.

"Do you cherish and continue to pursue your lofty ambitions, or do you just want a stable, well-paying job?"

Silence stretched as Ves fell silent for a moment. Who would want to admit they counted among the latter? Many Rawlings students developed considerable egos due to the prestige of their school!

"From my observation and experiences of other mech companies, they always drive a hard bargain." He grinned. "Let me tell you about one of the unspoken rules of the mech industry. The lead designers, who are mostly the bosses to these companies, don't want their subordinate mech designers to get too uppity."

That sounded very odd!

"In order for a subordinate to become useful, they have to develop a lot of skills and improve their overall design abilities. However, they don't want you to become too good, because you'll eventually quit and take away all of the skills that the mech company has invested in you! Sure, the contracts you sign will most likely compel you to pay your former employers a share of the profits of your new business ventures, but it is still a wasteful event in their eyes!"

As a business owner, Ves had long grappled about this subject himself. From his standpoint, the most useful design team consisted of subordinates who worked for him long enough to be able to compliment his design style!

Such a good design team did not appear when Ves threw a bunch of random graduates together! It took years of training, guidance and indoctrination in order to mold a design team in his desired shape!

If Ves poured years of effort and investment in molding a subordinate mech designer into his ideal shape, only for the ungrateful fellow to submit his resignation in order to leverage his improved skills into starting his own business, then Ves would have egg on his face!

"Nonetheless, even if mech designers don't want you to facilitate all of your learning and progression goals, this is incredibly important. Just because you have your school doesn't mean your learning has ended! In fact, it has just begun! The gap between a new entrant in the job market and the top mech designers in the industry is immense, and the most pivotal difference is the humongous gap in skills and knowledge!"

He thought back on what he experienced when he'd been assigned to serve as a liaison between the Mech Corps and the Kadar-Neyvis Group.

Witnessing the circumstances of the low-ranking mech designers that made up their design teams was a real eye-opener to him that continued to guide his own thoughts on the matter.

"Forget the salary. Forget the vacation days. Forget the working hours. If you want to earn an easy living off the skills and knowledge you've acquired at Rawlings or enjoy a pleasant work-life balance, then go ahead and negotiate on those terms."

He chuckled.

"As for the future mech designers among you who don't want to give up on your ambitions and are willing to work hard enough to realize them, then make sure you negotiate the right employment contract! Rather than maximize your present gains, instead focus your efforts on securing your future!"

He noted that a lot of students became confused as they failed to follow his train of thought. Evidently, Rawlings hadn't provided them with sufficient career guidance.

Then again, he couldn't blame the school for doing so. Rawlings already had its hands full teaching more essential subjects. Career guidance always played second fiddle to more important priorities.

Both the schools and their students tended to treat career orientation as an afterthought!

"Each of you possess value, though the exact amount varies according to your results and your competences. Regardless, employers of mech designers like myself are willing to pay you to borrow your abilities. We're even willing to invest in you so that you become more useful to us, and this is the key to reaching your ambitions. Negotiating additional training in the skills you need to become a mech designer to be reckoned with is your number one priority!"

Every Rawlings student was already set for life when they graduated. But a comfortable life as a professional was not enough to those who possessed greater ambitions!

"The learning doesn't end when you graduate." He repeated. "Especially not in the cases of science and engineering-based professions such as ours. Not only do you have to keep up with current developments, you also have to go beyond and build up your skills and knowledge base! Only then will you be able to increase your value to the point where your future truly opens up!"

Ves swept his arm across the entire audience as if he conjured a dream. "Your future matters. Each of you wants to obtain the opportunity to design your own mechs. Don't deny it. It's what you are all here for. Reality and circumstances may prevent you from realizing this desire, but that does not mean you are forever deprived of the opportunity once you graduate. Keep learning. Keep improving. Keep accumulating experience. If you work hard enough, you will get there."

Another pause stretched on as Ves momentarily halted.

Someone eventually raised his hand. "Which employers are the best?"

Ah, the question that Ves had been waiting for! \"Great question! It depends on your value and your demands. Some employers are a bit more generous when it comes to training their subordinates than others. The higher your value, better the conditions. If you're not as good, I think you'll have to search harder to get what you need, but I don't think any graduate from Rawlings will encounter much hindrance on this end. This is an advantage you all share!\"

Just like Ansel back at the Bright Republic, the academic standard of Rawlings was a lot more rigorous than usual. Their graduates started off with a better footing than those who emerged from less prestigious institutions.

\"Some mech companies and lead designers are more accommodating than others in enabling you to pursue your ambitions. I've witnessed some scummy circumstances where the members of a design team are deprived of their opportunities to improve the abilities they need to transition to a better career track. Don't work for these employers if you want to reach the top of our profession. During your negotiations, be exacting on the terms related to your training. Be willing to give ground on other terms if necessary.\"

As Ves elaborated on the terms that mech designers ought to value more or less, the overall thread of his lesson became clear.

If mech designers wanted to pursue their ambition, then they had to be willing to sacrifice present gains for future benefits!

Ves did add a caveat to his advice. \"Make no mistake. There is always a price. Nothing comes for free. Relative to industry standards, your pay will suck. Your working hours will be long. Your employer will demand higher quality results from you. You'll have to abide by all kinds of burdensome conditions once you leave your employer. However, as long as these sacrifices bring you closer to fulfilling your ambitions, then it is worth it! Gaining the opportunity to advance to Senior in your lifetime is worth it even if

you are contractually obliged to pay ten percent of your profits to your former employers!\

The choices he put forward caused a lot of students to consider or reconsider their future careers.

Were they following the right trajectory?

No one who harbored ambitions settled for mediocrity. Each of these dreamers were willing to make sacrifices to obtain a chance to achieve greatness!

Ves grinned. He could sense the unwillingness within the troubled expressions of the audience. This was exactly what he wanted to see!

Chapter 1454 A Great Employer

Ves always equated teaching to indoctrination.

As long as a teacher commanded attention and maintained the illusion that he knew what he was talking about, he could shovel all kinds of nonsense into the minds of his unwitting pupils!

He had the entire auditorium eating from the palm of his hand. His unwavering confidence, his imposing attire, his impressive record and his deliberative verbal manipulations all caused him to come across an authority figure!

He momentarily indulged in his successful attempt at entrancing the auditorium filled with thousands of enraptured students. He had the feeling he could abuse his power over them to a much greater extent!

Of course, Ves would never pull off something so egregious at a friendly venue. The professors sitting at the front still maintained sufficient awareness. They would never allow him to indoctrinate the Rawlings students with impunity.

The contract he signed with Rawlings already laid out what he was permitted to say or not. He abided by a lot of limitations and surrendered many other rights as well.

Yet the reason he gave so much ground on so many terms for his guest lecture was because he pursued a very specific aim!

He wanted to gain the permission to talk about something very specific! Though Rawlings almost canceled his guest lecture due to this demand, Professor Nxi eventually allowed it as long as Ves did not go overboard!

Seeing that he sufficiently primed his audience, he began to make his appeal.

"Speaking of employment opportunities, let me tell you what my mech company has to offer."

He snapped his fingers, causing the central projection to come alive again. The logo of the LMC hovered majestically over his head. The projection then switched to various depictions of his original mech models.

Though their projection forms failed to convey the full might of their auras, a pale shadow of it still went through. Ves gradually raised the spiritual barrier over his overcoat in order to reduce Zeigra's overpowering aura.

At least a few of the more sensitive people in the crowd sensed a hint of the charm in the mechs projected in the auditorium. Their interest in the LMC visibly increased!

"The Living Mech Corporation is a young but successful mech company based in the Bright Republic. I founded it in the belief that there is demand for mechs that are more than just commodities. Our motto reflects my design philosophy."

The main projection shifted to footage of Jannzi's amazing performance during the product reveal of his Aurora Titan! As her dazzling performance

and the Shield of Samar's flickering of forced resonance played out in its full, edited glory, his iconic phrase faded into view.

Living Mechs. Partners for Life.

"Our mechs are designed to put the needs of the mech pilot central. I believe that the best mechs are those that enable their users to bring out the utmost of their piloting ability in the cockpit!"

The projection shifted to depicting scenes of archival battle footage. The crowd began to be subjected to snapshots of battles where his Blackbeaks, Crystal Lords and Aurora Titans played the leading role in the engagements.

Each instance, his mechs played a pivotal role in the battles!

Ves smiled. "If you want to become a part of our team and help us propagate our vision for mechs, then consider applying to the LMC. You'll be working directly under me in a new, exciting environment, away from the boundaries and strictures of the Sentinel Kingdom!"

He had to be careful not to criticize the Sentinel Kingdom. The Sentinels possess a lot of pride in their state, and for good reason! Sentinel wasn't the strongest third-rate state in the Komodo Star Sector for nothing!

"What I said earlier applies here as well. As long as you possess some value, I won't be parsimonious with you. Not only will you have the opportunity to benefit from my wisdom and guidance, but you will also have access to our growing internal library of textbooks and other learning resources. I have no use for mech designers who can only count to ten. The greater your abilities, the more rewarding it is for you to work in our design team!"

A student at the back of the auditorium stood up and raised her hand. "Mr. Larkinson, what if we decide to part ways?"

"You're free to go. It's as simple as that." Ves casually waved his hand as if it was no big deal. "I do have to add that you'll have to abide by the industry-standard conventions regarding trade secrets and sharing a portion of the proceeds of your earnings when you leave my employment."

A lot of people frowned when they heard the latter term again. No one wanted to add on an extra tax to their future earnings!

Ves crossed his arms. "I know that passing on a portion of your earnings to your former employer doesn't sound very pleasant, but all of these terms are negotiable. In truth, I don't want your money. The main reason why this industry standard is in place is because I really don't want you to go. If you are worth it, I will do my best to offer you incentives to stay in my design team."

"What kind of incentives are you talking about?"

"It could be anything. If you take my advice seriously and prioritize your progression, then I'm very willing to mentor you! Don't think lightly of this opportunity! I've already mentored a young mech designer before and she has shaped up to become a very talented mech designer with a bright future ahead of her! If you are willing to trust me to guide your development, I promise you that you'll be in the right hands!"

A lot of students started to rouse from their enthrallment. Almost no one seriously desired to work for Ves. Leaving their friends, families and the Sentinel Kingdom behind to work for a foreigner in a very foreign state did not appeal to most Rawlings students.

In addition, citizens of the Sentinel Kingdom had to pass through a lot of bureaucratic hurdles in order to gain permission to work abroad. Though Ves could smooth over most of the hurdles, there was no way that the Sentinel Kingdom would allow him to poach the most promising new Sentinel mech designers.

Even so, Ves still wanted to cast his hook and see what kind of fish he could manage to reel in. Though most of the students here still required a few years of study to graduate, this was exactly why he wanted to make his offer at this time.

Most students were still available! By the time a class of students graduated, his competitors would have already snapped the talents up! Only middling performers who failed to attract the interests of the recruiters on the campus were still available.

While Ves figured he could surreptitiously augment their performance by sneaking some Attribute Candies in their diet, that was way too dangerous.

If his entire design team suddenly turned to geniuses when they came under his care, then he would doubtlessly attract a lot of unwelcome attention!

In addition, the awry separation of Carlos from the LMC soured Ves to the idea of investing his valuable Attribute Candies to other people under his employ.

While he was willing to hand them out to the people he could depend upon, the circle of people he could trust was depressingly small. Aside from his family and his Kinner bondsmen, there were not a lot of people left who he was willing to empower with this incredibly valuable reward.

Even if the Attribute Candies only cost a few thousand DP each, their actual value in the Komodo Star Sector was priceless!

No. If his subordinates wanted to augment their attributes, then Ves would pay for genetic treatments. Although this method of augmentation always came with personality changes and other unpleasant side effects, it was the prevailing norm within the industry and high society.

An interested student raised her hand.

"Sir, what are your policies on self-designed mechs? Will you allow us to publish our own designs."

"I have different accommodations for that. Unlike other employers, I won't completely prohibit you from publishing your own mech designs that you have developed in your own time. However, I do have some conditions..."

He patiently began to answer some of the common questions from the interested students. Though only a tiny fraction of his audience were interested to begin with, this still amounted to dozens of future mech designers!

Ves happily engaged with the audience and tried to present himself and the LMC as an exciting alternative to the existing employment opportunities in the Sentinel Kingdom.

Rawlings graduates never had to struggle too much to obtain respectable employment. However, the accommodations he made were very generous. Only a small number of mech companies could match the rewards he had to offer.

"With respect, Mr. Larkinson, while all of this sounds great, what do you want in return?" Someone asked. "Besides doing our jobs."

Ah. Someone finally caught up that Ves wasn't being so generous without cause. The entire reason why he threw in such juicy bait was because he insisted on a very important demand!

"Nothing comes for free." He responded, hammering home the lesson. "In exchange for all of the generosity that the LMC is willing to provide, you will have to agree to fixed employment terms, for example five or ten years. This isn't that unusual in the mech industry and many MTA-enforced contracts include such clauses. You are still free to quit, but you'll have to pay a heavy penalty if you quit before your term ends. I don't want all of my mech

designers to quit abruptly. When you sign up to the LMC, you're in it for at least an entire tour. No less."

Though this demand was one of the more stringent ones in a mech designer employment contract, it wasn't a big deal if Ves abided by his promises to assist in the training and development of his subordinates.

"Is that all, sir?"

Ves shook his head. "There is also something else. I'll be splitting up my subordinate mech designers in two distinct groups. One group is subject to less stringent restrictions but also won't receive as much guidance and investment from me. Another group is open to those who are willing to stick with my company and I will receive a lot more benefits! However, the biggest price you'll have to pay is to promise to stick with me regardless where I go! If I relocate to the Hexadric Hegemony for any reason, you'll have to go with me! If I move to an entirely different star sector, you'll be obliged to follow me around!"

Ves needed to cultivate a team of dedicated mech designers! In preparation for his grand expedition, he wanted to bring at least a basic team of mech designers who he could trust and who were willing to stick with him through thick and thin!

While he could just as easily coordinate his design projects with design teams based at the Mech Nursery, Ves did not wish to perform his most delicate design work via remote.

Though the grand expedition was still around a decade away, Ves had to lay the groundwork right away.

The sooner he formed a dedicated team of mech designers who were willing to uproot their entire families and accompany him on his grand expedition, the more productive the team would be. Trying to set up a team of loyalist mech

designers on the go was a lot more troublesome and would inevitably lead to a huge reduction in his productivity at the start of the expedition!

As Ves elaborated on the terms and threw some hints on what he had in store, interest from most of the students plummeted.

Mech designers were inherently resistant to restrictions! If they were willing to abide by a humongous amount of rules and regulations, then they might as well join the military, which was a much better employer compared to Ves!

Only a handful of mech designers still expressed interest in the offer.

To Ves, that was enough!

Chapter 1455 Hopeful Applicants

The guest lecture ended on a pleasant note. While Ves hadn't received a standing ovation, he nonetheless earned a lot of appreciation from the students gathered at the auditorium.

Along with describing some of his personal experienced, the topics he addressed all widened people's eyes to the career options that opened up to them when they finally departed from Rawlings with a degree.

With how insulated Cinach VIII tended to be, the Rawlings students lived too much in their own bubble. They had no idea how difficult it was for a mech designer to stand out and excel in the mech industry.

Ves hoped that he managed to influence the future mech designers into taking the future more seriously. With their busy academic course loads, it was easy for them to get lost in the present.

As Ves finally stepped off the podium amidst the enduring applause, he met up with Nitaa. Gavin also returned after arranging some business.

"I followed your entire guest lecture from the start via a livestream." His assistant said as he stared oddly at Ves. "I have to say... was that really you out there?"

Ves frowned. "Yes. What of it, Benny?"

"I thought you'd go out on stage with your cat ears on your head and pull off something crazy. Where was your trademark Devil Tongue? I mean, every other time you engaged in public speaking, you always found a way to mesmerize an entire state!"

"That was one time! I'm not like that all the time! I have enough self-control to rein in my Devil Tongue!"

"Professor Pendleton of the AUMD sure got a taste of that self-control of yours."

"He had it coming! Senior or not, he was heckling my product reveal!" Ves angrily burst out before he restrained himself. "No one tried to stir up any trouble for me today. The goal of my guest lecture is to impart knowledge, make myself look good in the footage and attract aspiring mech designers to apply to work at the LMC. I can't very well do that if I scorch the students, can I?"

Ves considered fellow mech designers to be part of his own kind. As long as they did not oppose him directly, he felt more inclined to conduct a fruitful and substantive discussion with his fellow colleagues.

The dozens or so exchanges he conducted with his peers also helped in refining some of his rough edges. Mech designers each shared the same language, and addressing a class full of mech design students was a genuine pleasure in his eyes.

Ves moved on. "Let's head to the nearby office and see how many fish I've hooked."

For the rest of the afternoon, Ves sat in a borrowed office while he entertained various guests.

Each of them consisted of mech design students who wanted to explore the option of working for the LMC.

"Mr. Larkinson, it's an honor to meet with you in person!" An enthused young man gushed. "I've always felt restless while I studied at Rawlings. It's only after I attended your lecture that I've realized what's been bothering me. The Sentinel Kingdom is too constrained! With noble born mech designers monopolizing all of the best positions, there are too little opportunities for me here. Your offer to work under you is exactly what I'm missing!"

"Mhmm." Ves casually nodded while he perused the student's record on the desk terminal. "Mr. Ferdinand Gerze, right? I can't help but notice that your academic record is.. not very exceptional. Your grades barely make it past the minimum threshold to pass your courses."

The importance of knowledge to a mech designer could not be overstated. If mech designers only showed up and put in the bare minimum in their studies at school, then would they be any better when they graduated?

A mech designer never stopped learning. Graduating with a degree in mech design did not mean they were no longer obliged to hit the books!

To his credit, Ferdinand did not look ashamed. Instead, he maintained a positive demeanor, as if his enthusiasm to work for the LMC was enough of a reason to snap him up!

"I may not rank at the top, but as you have stated during your guest lecture, the academic standards of Rawlings is very high. I believe my competences in the relevant fields is sufficient enough to keep up with your expectations!"

"Mhmmm. That's very confident of you." Ves nonchalantly petted Lucky, who was lounging on the desk, while he skimmed over the other portions of

Ferdinant's record. "I see you have engaged in a number of extracurricular activities as well."

Ferdinand confidently grinned. "I spent much of my time at Rawlings acting as the treasurer of the Rawlings Polo Club. I also assisted in organizing field trips to several notable mech manufacturing sites. I've acquired vital leadership and financial management experience that prepares me well for any positions that you might wish for me to fulfill!"

"Get out."

"Pardon?"

Ves waved his hand as if to throw Ferdinand's record in the trash. The projection winked out.

"I've been very clear with my words, Mr. Gerze. I'm sorry to inform you that you don't meet our hiring standards. You may leave now and make way for better qualified students."

"But why!" Ferdinand stood up and burst out. "My grades may not be the best, but I'm just as good as any other Rawlings student in completing mech design assignments! Unlike some of the nerds here who lock themselves up in their rooms to cram their heads full of science, I've been spending lots of time outside to lead the Rawlings Polo Club and arrange visitations to many different mech manufacturing facilities! I have skills that other mech designers lack!"

"That sounds great.. if I was in the market for a manufacturing complex supervisor or something." Ves crossed his arms. "I think I made it very clear that I'm looking to recruit future mech designers who are good at their main purpose: designing mechs or assisting me in designing mechs. On that front, any struggling mech designer that I can pick up on the streets is better than you! No matter how good with people you are or how much leadership

experience you've acquired, if you're not sufficiently motivated to perform the core functions of your profession, then I have no use for you in my design teams!\

\\"Mr. Larkinson! Please give me a chance! I can prove myself! I can resign as treasurer to devote more time to my remaining studies!\"

\\"GET. OUT!\" Ves boomed.

He abruptly raised the aura emanating from his Pride of Dusk, putting an immense amount of pressure on Ferdinand's shoulders!

The man fled as if Zeigra was running right behind his heels!

Gavin and Nitaa who had been standing at the side both looked askance at Ves.

\\"You were a bit harsh on the kid, boss. He was really eager to work with you. Can't you cut some slack?\"

\\"Nope. I don't have a need for leaders or mech designers who are good in anything else. In fact, I don't want to hire any assertive or proactive mech designers if I can help it. What I seek are nerds who love to design mechs and are pretty good at it in order to form a competent but subservient design team!\"

\\"Oh.\"

\\"I rejected Ferdinand because his grades and extracurricular activities reflect his attitude. It's okay that he participates in the running of a club, but he's been spending so much time there that he's obviously not devoting enough time on his studies. Barely passing his courses means he probably considers studying to be a chore. This is not the kind of mech designer who fits well in the design teams that I envision.\"

A handful of students who knocked on his door possessed similar records. Ves kicked them out of his office without fail. He didn't want his future design teams to get uppity by filling them with mech designers who stood up for themselves.

The types of students who entered his office also came with other motives.

"My name is Alicia Washer." The young woman smiled as she slowly sat down on the empty chair across the desk. Her motions expressly emphasized her tantalizing figure behind her tight-fitting pencil skirt and blouse. "I admire you, Mr. Larkinson."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "How so?"

"You're a credit to the mech industry. Not only have you managed to become a Journeyman at your age, you've also taken part in Lady Miralix's Crown Hunt! Tales of this hunt have already become the stuff of legend! You're so brave, Mr. Larkinson."

"It's nothing." Ves casually waved his hand. "Looks like your grades are pretty decent. It looks like you excel in humanoid artificial musculature systems."

"The humanoid form is a fascinating subject." She said with a husky voice. Her finger trailed from her long, thin legs up to her waist before slowly trailing higher. "I can spend endless hours exploring the landscape of the human body. I can even explore yours, if you wish."

"..."

Ves turned his eyes from her record and gazed at her with a dour look. "Get out."

"Uh, what?"

"I already have a girlfriend. I don't need a bed warmer. Now lift your sleazy butt off that chair and tumble out of this room!"

To her credit, she didn't try to linger and plead with him. Recognizing that she had lost this battle, she simply smiled coyly at Ves before slowly and sensually rising to her feet. She turned around and strutted out of the office, giving Ves and everyone else a very good glimpse of her swaying rear.

"If you.. ever reconsider, please call my comm."

Once the door slid shut, Ves rested his elbows on his desk and placed his face against his palms.

"Urgh. What kind of mech designer is willing to do something like this?"

"It makes sense for Miss Washer to pursue you. Capturing your heart is an easy ticket to success."

"I have a girlfriend."

"Mech designers can have mistresses, you know."

"Gloriana would go absolutely bonkers if I entertained that notion! Just drop it, Benny."

There was no way that Ves would flirt with any woman so long as he was in a relationship with Gloriana!

Just the thought of what she would do if she caught him with another woman sent shivers through his back!

Fortunately, despite entertaining numerous clowns and unqualified applicants, Ves did manage to come across a number of students who peaked his interest.

"Mayer Torto." Ves began as he swept through the man's record. "Your grades are the highest I've seen so far. I can imagine that plenty of employers

would like to take you under their wings. What brings a good performer like you to this room?"

"I'm flattered by your praise." Mayer politely replied as he adjusted the clear visor on his head. "While I have received numerous offers from other mech companies, none of them really spoke to me in the way that you do. Your lecture opened my eyes to the exploitative nature hidden in their contract terms."

"The terms I put forward aren't easy to stomach either."

"I know. The difference is that you are being open about it. You've clearly laid out your expectations. More importantly, you've left a window open for us to bloom and stake out on our own. I appreciate that. My future is important to me and I don't want to close any doors by choosing the wrong employer."

Ves smiled at Mayer. This fellow had a sensible head on his shoulders.

"Sounds like you've taken my lessons to heart. Why are you willing to depart the Sentinel Kingdom and come work for me in a foreign state?"

"While I love my state just as much as any other Sentinel, the game is rigged." Mayer sighed. "If you aren't born into a house or plead fealty to them, you'll always be left at the periphery of the Sentinel mech community."

From what Ves understood, the noble houses regularly took in retainers and vassals, binding them with permanent contracts to ensure their loyalty!

While professionals such as mech designers generally get a really good deal out of it, some such as Mayer cherished their autonomy.

Chapter 1456 Preliminary Employment Contract

The more Ves spoke to Mayer, the more he gained a favorable impression of the senior student.

Mayer Torto not only performed well in school, but also expressed a lot of passion for mech design. The student did not engage in a lot of extracurricular activities. Aside from going on a couple of field trips and participating in some of the university's festivals as a contestant in design competitions, the young man spent most of his time deepening his understanding for mechs.

From what Ves could tell of Mayer's excellent grades in design-oriented courses, the applicant possessed a considerable affinity for mechs!

Ves possessed a hidden advantage when it came to hiring. Unlike other people, his spiritual senses allowed him to ascertain whether the applicants possessed spiritual potential.

Each mech designer who possessed more than just a negligible amount of spirituality was a potential Journeyman!

While that didn't mean that they were guaranteed to advance, there was no doubt that their potential was higher. As long as they possessed a good work ethic and a passion for mech design, becoming a Journeyman was not ruled out!

However, hiring someone capable of breaking through the extraordinary threshold came with its own downsides.

If any of his subordinates made the lucky breakthrough and turned into a Journeyman, then their continued presence in the LMC came into doubt.

Lots of mech designers would opt to resign from a design team as soon as possible and start up their own company. As esteemed and competent Journeymen, there was virtually no chance for them to fail in finding a footing in the mech market!

Therefore, the decision to hire someone like Mayer Torto was not as simple as it seemed. Ves would have to take into account that some of the members

of his design team might go once they gained what they wanted by working at the LMC.

Ves accepted this possibility. Keeping mech designers bound to the LMC was not a good idea. They came into touch with sensitive internal data about ongoing design projects and could easily employ numerous means to sabotage a mech design.

While he intended to do the best he could to indoctrinate his subordinates into remaining loyal to him, he still had to leave a door open in order to come across as a magnanimous employer.

As long as his subordinates wanted to leave, they were allowed to do so as long as they abided by the terms of their contracts.

To Ves, it wasn't such a bad idea to release a subordinate mech designer into the wild every now and then. Since he intended to guide and babysit their progression to an extent, he could be considered their mentors.

The bond between a mentor and a protege always endured. Even as the proteges went on to start their own companies, they always retained ties to their mentor.

This was the beginnings of an extended mech designer network. Ever since he became exposed to how Master Olson developed a considerable network of current and former disciples that extended her reach and performed assignments on her behalf, Ves wanted to imitate her and develop his own circle of mech designers!

Therefore, someone like Mayer Torto brought a lot of value to the table.

In his Novice and Apprentice stages, he could serve as a bright and clever mech designer who could assist Ves in his design projects.

If he ever managed to advance to Journeyman, either with or without assistance from Ves, Mayer would still be an asset to the LMC even if he decided to separate with the company.

The close and friendly ties between their companies benefited both sides! It was in the best interest for Ves and his former subordinates to maintain their existing ties!

For these reasons, Ves adopted a considerably more welcoming attitude to Mayer. Someone who possessed spiritual potential deserved special treatment!

"You won't regret working for the LMC." He smiled in a good-natured manner. "As long as your performance at my company matches your performance at Rawlings, I'm sure you'll become ready to take on greater responsibilities soon enough. The better you become at your job, the more you will be able to influence our design projects. This will provide you with much more practical experience which can assist you in designing your own mechs."

Mayer's interest piqued at that. "I heard that you'd allow us to publish our own mech designs if we develop some. What accommodations do you offer?"

"If your design meets the standards of the LMC, then I'm willing to allow you to publish your mech design under our main brand."

"I take it that it won't be easy to meet those standards." Mayer astutely remarked as he spotted the trap in those words!

Ves maintained his smile. "That is true. The LMC generally distinguishes itself with the quality of its products. If your mech design is too crude to match the expectations of our brand, then you have two options. First, you can allow me to make a pass on your design and address the shortcomings of your work."

"You'll do this for free?"

"Not exactly. In keeping with the conventions of our industry, the bulk of the ownership of your design will fall into my hands. You will still earn some credit, but only as a contributing mech designer."

This alternative did not sound very appealing to someone like Mayer. This was essentially letting others reap most of the benefits of his hard work!

Ves already experienced the other end of this kind of deal with Professor Ventag. While it didn't sound fair, a low-ranking mech designer did not have a lot of right to speak. This was the best deal they could get under the circumstances!

"What if I insist on maintaining possession of my mech design?"

"Then the LMC will allow you to publish it under an alternative, lower-cost brand. Right now, this brand is still in the works, but we'll roll it out as soon as soon as we produce the first mechs designed by my subordinates. While your mech designs won't be able to piggyback from our main brand, you will still have an opportunity to see your mechs being put to their intended use."

As a mech designer himself, Ves knew that the advancement of a mech designer was highly dependent on the influence they exerted through their products. If Mayer was forced to shelve his completed mech designs in a forgotten archive, then he would hardly be able to progress!

Not a lot of employers offered this option to their subordinates in the first place. Ves believed it was not due to a deliberate effort to sabotage the progression of their lackeys, but rather because it was a pain in the butt to divert precious production capacity to the fabrication of unworthy and inferior mechs.

To be honest, Ves held some of the same concerns. However, if it secured him the loyalty and devotion of a talent with a good chance of becoming a

Journeyman like Mayer, then Ves did not mind producing the mechs at a net loss!

"This option sounds fair." The Rawlings student nodded in satisfaction. "I have a few more questions, sir."

"Ask away. I am at your disposal."

After entertaining numerous questions and asking some of his own, Ves felt that he had been clicking more and more with Mayer. He was very impressed with what he saw and could easily imagine the Rawlings student as a pivotal part of his design team.

"It says here that you are trying to develop a specialty towards.. command, communication and control systems, is that correct?" He asked as he went over the portion of Mayer's record that described his potential design philosophy.

"That is still correct. I'm not so much interested in the performance of a single mech than seeing how they perform alongside other mechs. Most mech combat that takes place in the galaxy does not consist of duels where one mech fights another mech at a time."

Ves was impressed with what he heard. Mayer had a good point!

"That's true. Outside from mech games and the mech dueling circuits, mechs are always deployed in numbers ranging from twelve-mech squads to ten-thousand-mech divisions at a time."

"This is exactly why I want to develop a specialty related to increasing the coordination between mechs. While I'm not entirely settled on the design philosophy I wish to form, it will definitely fall under the field of communications."

"That's an odd field to specialize in considering your interests. Most communication specialists delve into expanding the capabilities of signals and jamming technology."

"I'm not looking to strengthen the raw parameters of my mechs. Instead, I want to develop their existing utilization to a higher level."

The goal that Mayer tried to achieve sounded similar to the approach that Ves adopted for his design philosophy. Both tried to improve mechs by augmenting their utilization rather than raising their performance!

As Ves learned all he wanted out of the interview, he decided to make an offer to Mayer.

"Are you willing to sign a preliminary employment contract to work for the LMC as a member of one of our design teams?"

"I am." Mayer responded. His intention hadn't wavered after becoming more familiar with Ves and the LMC! "I would love to receive the opportunity to work for your company!"

"That's great!" Ves gestured towards Gavin. "My assistant here is ready to prepare a suitable preliminary employment contract for you. You can hash out the details of your commitment among yourselves."

Gavin took Mayer to a spare office to draw up and go over the contract.

Different from a regular employment contract, the preliminary version was merely a written promise to work for a company in the future.

Mech companies and many other businesses employed these kinds of contracts in order to 'reserve' promising candidates while still in school.

As long as someone like Mayer signed this contract, they were essentially taken off the job market. No other company was allowed to hire them except

in special cases, such as the military wishing to draft an already-committed mech designer.

However, the chances of that happening was low in the Sentinel Kingdom. As long as a noble house didn't come and throw around their weight, Ves could expect to add Mayer to his company as soon as he graduated from Rawlings and traveled to the Bright Republic.

Of course, if either side wanted to break the contract, then they had to pay the requisite penalties to each other.

If Ves didn't want Mayer to work for the LMC, then he would have to pay a very hefty amount of money to the Sentinel.

If Mayer no longer wished to work for LMC, then the consequences were a bit more complex. Instead of paying a monetary penalty directly, his next employer was obliged to pay the penalty in his stead!

This was because Mayer's alternative choice essentially poached him from the LMC!

Normally, the price of poaching wasn't too serious. The sums ranged from a few hundred-thousand bright credits to hundreds of millions bright credits!

The upper range could reach ridiculous figures if the future employee in question was a prodigy or high performer!

In the case of Mayer who possessed spiritual potential, Ves was very loath to let this promising seed go! He already sent a silent message to Gavin to insert an incredibly high penalty fee in case Mayer changed his mind and wanted to work for someone else.

To Ves, the value of a potential Journeyman subordinate easily surpassed the current net worth of the LMC!

He trusted that Gavin would find some way to add these terms into the preliminary employment contract in exchange for conceding on other points.

"Okay, next!"

Ves still had to go through a number of other prospective mech design students before he was finished for the day. Hopefully, he could add some other commitments to the list by the time he was done for the day.

Chapter 1457 Stalled Completion

At the end of the interview sessions, Ves managed to secure three more commitments.

This did not mean that Ves could expect to expand his design teams with four new mech designers in the coming years as the Rawlings students finished their studies.

As much as Ves saw promise in the students, if they happened to meet an accident, earn considerably lower grades or quit studying mech design altogether, then the preliminary employment contracts became moot.

In addition to these possibilities, Ves also had to take poaching into account. Though it was considerably pricey to do so, occasionally mech companies did succeed in luring mech designers they considered desirable into breaking one contract in order to enter into another contract.

This was mostly the case when a student achieved better grades since the signing of the preliminary employment contract. Mech companies also had reasons to poach a committed mech design student if their developing specialties synergized or complimented the specialties of the lead designers!

"It would be like Gloriana doing everything she can to buy out the commitment of someone with a specialty like me at a mech university."

This didn't happen very often, and none of the mech design students Ves had spoken with merited this kind of attention. Even Mayer Torto didn't attract too

much attention so long as no one believed he had a realistic shot at advancing to Journeyman.

He frowned a bit as he considered the other three prospects. None of the students he signed up afterwards possessed any spiritual potential. While there was a minute chance they would develop some over the course of their lives, Ves silently discounted this possibility.

The more painful fact was that Ves interviewed a couple of other students who also possessed spiritual potential.

"It's a shame they don't meet my standards!"

Just because a student possessed spiritual potential didn't mean it was a good idea for Ves to take them in! If their work ethic was not up to standard or if their personalities fit poorly with the design teams that he envisioned, then he would only be inviting trouble if he secured their commitments anyway.

The fact of the matter was that there were plenty of people out there with spiritual potential, but never realized them due to their own choices.

In any case, Ves wasn't in a hurry to fill up his design teams with subordinates who each had the opportunity to advance to Journeyman someday.

"I do have to admit that their caliber is greater than that of ordinary people."

Ever since the System confirmed the existence of mech affinity, Ves began to develop an understanding of what it did to mech designers.

When Novices and Apprentices with spiritual potential developed an affinity for mechs, their ability to work with mechs increased. They spent less effort into developing new skills and designing mechs came more naturally to them. It was as if they enjoyed a preview of what it was like to carry a design seed in their minds!

Of course, due to their low spiritual strengths, the boost they received was fairly marginal. Their so-called 'talent' was not as decisive as a good attitude, a diligent work ethic and a genuine passion for mechs!

In truth, mech affinity only really came into force when someone became a high-ranking mech designer! At his strength, a modest increase in mech affinity led to a much more noticeable swing in improvement!

Although Ves had not yet embarked on another project after he completed the Devil Tiger design project, he already felt a bit closer to mechs than before. He suspected that the next time he designed a mech, he would be considerably more productive than before!

In any case, the relative lack of importance of mech affinity for low-ranking mech designers meant that Ves put a lot more weight on the other criteria on his list.

If he wanted to establish a well-run design team, then he had to make sure that he selected the right kind of people!

For now, Ves intended to establish two design teams.

The first design team consisted of loyalists. He intended to staff it with mech designers who didn't mind participating in his upcoming grand expedition.

The second design team was made up of people like Ketis and Carlos before he left. This was where he dumped his less committed mech designers who pursued other objectives or were comfortable with staying in the same place.

"Maybe I'll start a third or a fourth design team one day." He murmured.

He already entertained the idea of setting up a shadow design team that would assist him in his illicit design projects such as the one he recently concluded. However, without an ironclad way of securing the absolute loyalty

and discretion of his subordinates, Ves would have to be crazy to involve other mech designers with his illegal dealings!

He shook his head. \"Two teams are enough to start with. I should focus on filling them up before thinking about setting up a third team!\"

There was still a chance he would welcome less than four Rawlings graduates in the coming years. While the future employees normally didn't tear up their preliminary employment contracts very often, this wasn't exactly a normal circumstance.

Working abroad could be very frightening. Even if Ves possessed enough influence to smooth over the bureaucratic obstacles, the Rawlings students had to be comfortable with the idea of working in a completely different state.

To some, the culture shock was too big!

\"The Bright Republic is a very different place from the Sentinel Kingdom.\" He muttered.

The class disparity was a lot less pronounced in his state compared to the Sentinel Kingdom. Nobles enjoyed prerogatives that commoners did not. It was so baked into their culture that the commoners he interacted with didn't express any jealousy or discontent at the favored treatment of their betters!

Nothing exemplified the differences more clearly than the fact that not a single noble born mech designer knocked on his door!

\"Those snobs already have their lives set for them! There is absolutely no reason for them to move away from a state that is expressly set up to benefit their class!\"

Even so, Ves had harbored hope that an exiled noble or an inconvenient spare wanted to shelter under his wing.

Sadly, it was not to be.

"Perhaps it's for the best." He muttered. "Adding a noble mech designer to my team will probably introduce a lot of friction."

Once Ves was done at Rawlings, he met with Professor Nxi one last time and bid farewell. Both sides got what they wanted and parted amicably.

As Ves returned to his hotel suite at Cinach VIII, he took stock with what he gained. He considered his guest lecture to be a success. He could already imagine the boost to his credibility now that he established a tie with the prestigious Rawlings University.

"I shouldn't overestimate the benefits, though. Giving a single guest lecture isn't enough to swing my reputation around."

As the evening rolled in, Ves sought some time for himself. It was time for him to check up on an issue that had long weighed on his mind.

Just like before, he grabbed Lucky and entered the bathroom before locking it. Next, materialized his System comm, activated his Privacy Shield before activating the System itself.

[Mech Designer System Menu]

Status

Designer

Missions

Skill Tree

Shop

Lottery

Inventory

"Missions."

The interface listed out seven pending missions. He ignored the five Supply Missions and directed his attention to his two Upgrade Missions.

[Upgrade Mission - Mechanics]

...

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

Reward:

[Mechanics - Senior]

[Upgrade Mission - Mechanics]

...

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

Reward:

[Mechanics - Senior]

"Come on, System!" He shouted at his System comm. "I completed my Devil Tiger design, did I not?! I fabricated a copy of the mech, which turned into a masterwork I might add!"

[...]

"Don't give the silent treatment to me, you synthetic bastard! Gimme my rewards already!"

[...]

Ves let out a storm of curses. The nerve of the System!

To be honest, Ves did slip up at the last step of his Upgrade Missions. Now that he lost possession of the Devil Tiger, he couldn't very well 'sell it to a worthy customer'.

His mother unilaterally deprived him of this opportunity!

"Can't you cut me some slack, System?! Now that my mom took the Devil Tiger, I'm sure it'll land in the hands of a worthy mech pilot!"

[...]

Ves slipped the System comm from his finger and banged it against the surface of the toilet bowl! For a moment, he thought about flushing it through the toilet! Let's see how much it enjoyed swimming in a pool of refuse!

"Get your act together! I refuse to let you hold these stupid Upgrade Missions hostage!"

[...]

"Look, I 'sold' the Devil Tiger, didn't I? Even though my mother initiated the transaction without my say-so, she paid for it at least! She left me that toy mech figurine behind! That's her payment! That's a sale in my book!"

[...]

This stupid stubborn System! Ves banged his System comm against the toilet bowl some more, though his actions only damaged the toilet bowl instead of the incredibly resilient and malleable device!

What could he do if the System refused to complete his Upgrade Missions? Would Ves continue to wander around with Journeyman-level Mechanics and Metallurgy Skills?

That would be a disaster of epic proportions! Other than convincing the System to pass the Upgrade Missions somehow, the only other alternative was to raise his proficiency in these two fields the old-fashioned way!

When Ves thought about the sheer amount of knowledge the System stuffed into his mind when he obtained Senior-level Physics, he shivered at the thought of how much time he would waste.

Ves was in a hurry! He couldn't afford to spend years or decades behind a desk just to study the thousands of textbooks and research papers required to raise his understanding of Mechanics and Metallurgy to the level of a Senior!

Time was a valuable resource!

The main reason why Ves still put up with the System despite his increasing misgivings over its origin and its motives was because it offered him the rare opportunity to buy more time!

Exchanging DP for the instant acquisition of Skills and Sub-Skills was the biggest bargain of his life. While his learning speed had improved enormously over the years, he still felt loath to hit the books again in order to study something as broad and all-encompassing as his main Skills.

He palmed his face. "Of course, another alternative is to design another smart metal mech and bestial mech."

That sounded a lot better as he would just waste a lot of months instead of years of his life. It still wasn't very ideal, though. Despite familiarizing himself with smart metal tech and bestial mech forms, he hardly explored the full potential of standard humanoid mechs yet. He felt no appetite to tackle another smart metal mech design or tiger mech design anytime soon!

Ves eyed his System comm with a dour expression.

"I'll tell mommy if you continue to remain stubborn. What would she do if she found out you deliberately sabotaged my progression."

[Congratulations! You have completed Upgrade Mission - Mechanics!]

[Congratulations! You have completed Upgrade Mission - Metallurgy!]

[Please stand by to receive the following reward: Mechanics - Senior.]

[Please stand by to receive the following reward: Metallurgy - Senior.]

The sudden turn of events befuddled Ves. After so much stubbornness from the System, it finally chose to give ground?

"How come you surrendered so easily?"

That was when a cargo hauler filled with knowledge abruptly smashed into his mind!

"AAAAHH! YOU STUPID SYSTEM!" He screamed, holding his head with his hands as two concurrent streams of knowledge tried to press their way into his brains! "TOO MUCH! IT'S TOO MUCH! DON'T GIVE ME BOTH OF MY REWARDS AT THE SAME TIME!"

The System was screwing him! Ves was sure of it! As he collapsed to the floor of the bathroom, Lucky grew alarmed and hovered closer.

"Meow?!"

"UGh! Watch over me, Lucky! AAHH! I have to deal with the bombardment against my mind! Only Nitaa can enter! You got that?!"

"Meow!"

Chapter 1458 Shadow Attire

Eventually, Nitaa came and lifted his body from the bathroom and placed him on the bed. Though she knew little why he ended up in a debilitated condition, she unwaveringly remained alert and stood guard throughout the entire night.

Ves needed that much time in order to handle the overwhelming flow of knowledge. Though the System did its best to push the immensity of both Senior-level Mechanics and Senior-level Metallurgy into his mind, with effort and patience he managed to push away the integration and slow down the rate of absorption.

At the end of the tenuous night, he managed to construct an arrangement in his mind where a metaphorical dam blocked off most of the flow. Only a small opening in the dam allowed a controlled amount of knowledge to go through.

"Around four weeks until I'm done."

This was the most he could cope with while at the same time diverting a sufficient amount of attention to his daily life. While he wouldn't be able to summon up the focus and energy to design a new mech during this period, he retained enough attention to speak with people or make decisions that didn't require too much thinking.

Ves breathed deeply as he finally pulled his entire focus from the jumble of his mind.

"Are you okay now, sir?" Nitaa asked through her fully-sealed combat armor. She had been fearing the worst. "Were you under attack or something?"

Figuring that she deserved some frankness for all her loyalty she had shown so far, Ves decided to reveal a hint of the truth.

"No. Not exactly. I did it to myself. Let's just say I augmented myself a bit too eagerly there. I'm fine now. After a couple of weeks of recovery, I'll be as good as new. In fact, I'll be even better as I get used to the changes."

"Does that mean you'll be stronger after you recover?"

"Yes."

Ves left his answer at that. Though he trusted Nitaa's loyalty, he always feared what would happen if she realized how happenstance he became a Holy Son. What if she stopped holding him in high regard? How eager would she serve a fake Holy Son who was nowhere close to matching the might and influence of a true Holy Son?

As Nitaa spent more time at his side, Ves wondered what she thought about him. Did she consider him to be a hidden dragon that still needed growing or a paper tiger who was much less impressive than he appeared?

For now, Ves could still depend on Nitaa's mental programming to compel her to obey the will of a Holy Son. He also bought her out in the Kinner tradition, which meant that she had to display near-absolute obedience to him. Both of these compulsions working together gave him enough of a buffer to earn her genuine appreciation and loyalty.

If there was one thing Ves had learned from seeing many fanatical organizations at work, it was that genuine loyalty was a better guarantee than forced obedience!

True believers were some of the most loyal people out there! Though Ves found this means to be a bit distasteful, he couldn't afford to let his misgivings hinder his safety and his ambition.

This was why he began to keep his eye out for loyalists. If he wanted to set off on his grand expedition without disrupting his existing routines, he needed to bring a lot of subordinates to keep things running.

Those who were willing to participate in an expeditionary fleet were always weirdos and deviants.

Hardly anyone wanted to disrupt their normal lives, leave their homes, abandon their friends and families just to go on an exploration tour in an extremely distant environment!

Expeditions that lasted for a couple of years were already bad enough. One that lasted for multiple decades that Ves envisioned meant that those who lived on the starships that made up the expeditionary fleet would effectively spend at least a third of their lives away from familiar soil!

This was too much to ask for most employees!

Since the decision to go on an extremely lengthy and life-changing expedition was so difficult to stomach, Ves needed to recruit a sufficient number of loyalists in advance.

Most of the people he recruited probably wouldn't start out as loyalists. It was up to him and the LMC to indoctrinate them into becoming more pliable to his needs. He had to convince them that jumping on a starship and going on a generational trek to exotic destinations was a great adventure instead of an abrupt way to ruin their steady lives!

Ves also decided he needed to spend more effort convincing more Larkinsons to come along as well. While he didn't trust every Larkinson, at least he could trust them a little bit more than complete strangers.

He planned to seed his grand expedition with a sufficient amount of Larkinsons in various leadership and supervisory positions. Spreading a hundred or so Larkinsons throughout his expeditionary fleet would do wonders to his grip on the men and women he brought along!

As long as the Larkinsons acted as his eyes and ears among the crews, Ves was willing to put up with the downsides of nepotism.

He sighed. "I used to believe that family has no place in my business."

There were definite downsides to involving his family even further. He knew the Larkinsons well enough that the biggest barrier to gaining their loyalty was to find a way to erode their patriotism.

The Larkinsons always served as the protectors of the Bright Republic. It was baked in their family's values and traditions from their birth. Ves too loved his home state, though as his interests began to diverge, he no longer considered it to be the center of his reality.

He knew most Larkinsons probably wouldn't be receptive to his suggestions, but he could probably get a few people over to his side as long as he chipped away at their resolve over the following decade.

"Some Larkinsons are content with their roles as cogs in the Bright Republic's military machine. Other Larkinsons don't want to put up with a steady but unfulfilling life."

The Larkinsons focused most of their efforts on nurturing the potentates among the families. As a norm, Ves knew very well that the family tended to neglect his own kind.

There was a lot of untapped potential there. Ves just needed to reach out and unearth it to gain an army of relatives who all benefited with him at the top.

As for how he planned to secure their loyalty?

"Money always works." He grinned.

No matter how much dividends the Larkinsons earned from owning a part of the LMC, they would never spread the wealth as much as the individual Larkinsons desired. The Larkinson Estate had to ensure the prosperity of the future generation of Larkinsons, so most of the money pouring in went on to fund further investments, particularly in real estate.

The average Larkinson didn't actually receive a bigger stipend from the Larkinson Estate! Only the mech pilots among the family enjoyed greater support!

"I'll have to start making moves on my family as soon as I get home." He muttered.

He added yet another goal to his lengthy list of goals. Though he managed to complete some of his objectives with his recent actions, the list still looked as daunting as ever. He simply had too much to do!

As soon as he completed his morning routine, he turned to Nitaa and Gavin. "Today is the day we enter the site where the Circle of Mota set up their temporary marketplace, right?"

Both of them nodded.

"Do you want me to go along?" Gavin asked.

Ves shook his head. "Not this time. I want you to maintain a visible presence on Cinach VIII to show that we haven't entirely disappeared. Just find some work that you can do on my behalf and pretend that I'm stuck in this hotel suite because I have to perform some urgent design work or something. It's important to set up a credible alibi before I feel confident enough to partake in a highly illicit underground gathering. The Battle Criers have already sent down one of their men to dress up in my Pride of Dusk in order to act as a decoy again."

The Circle of Mota was not a regular underground organization. The temporary marketplace they set up was completely different from the so-called black markets of the Reinald Republic.

Reinald itself pretty much condoned the vast majority of the illegal trade taking place in the Harkensen System!

It was different for the Sentinel Kingdom! They maintained a zero-tolerance policy towards pirates, and an organization like the Circle of Mota which explicitly sought to foster ties between Sentinels and Nyxian pirates was a cancer that had to be exterminated!

Ves risked much to participate in this gathering, but he hoped the potential gains might be worth it. Not only did he wish to look out for P-stones and F-stones, he also wanted to see whether the traders there knew more about geril spice.

Nitaa and Gavin both made ample preparations for the trip. Gavin coordinated with Crindon to procure different outfits that completely hid their bodies and dampened any scanning directed at their bodies.

While they weren't foolproof, any scanning that overcame the barriers would have to be so powerful that Ves could easily sense the attempts.

Gavin opened up a crate containing an outfit for Ves and an outfit for Nitaa.

The base of the outfit for Ves consisted of a specialized dampening hardsuit that resembled a suit of combat armor but without the protection. He also had the option to wear a voluminous, hooded black robe that resembled those worn by the Shadow Couriers. The fabric added even more protection against probing because the fabric incorporated a myriad of sensor-scrambling layers.

"Apparently, there is a thriving market for suits that are solely built to hide the identities of those who wear them." Gavin explained. "The shadow attire I've procured for you isn't cheap, but it's unique. Both the light hardsuit and the robe will do wonders in deflecting scans. Crindon already went over them and made sure they don't carry any bugs or other traps. The hardsuit is devoid of any powered systems to ensure maximum anonymity."

Ves was very satisfied with the so-called shadow attire. As he whipped out his Vulcaneye and attempted to scan them, he noticed that he encountered a high amount of interference that turned the readings fuzzy.

This was a very impressive result considering his Vulcaneye functioned a lot better than ordinary scanners! Inferior machines would probably only return static or junk data!

Nitaa grunted with approval, though she also added a warning. "Shadow attire is supposed to be one-use only. While sensors and scanners can't record who is inside, it can still register their exterior features. If you use the same shadow

attire again, then investigators can match your public appearances to the appearance of the individual wearing this distinctive outfit."

"In other words, shadow attire only works well if their users aren't idiots."

The outfit for Nitaa looked completely different. Her towering height made it difficult to obscure her identity!

In order to hide the fact that she was so goddamn tall, Gavin and Crindon worked to procure a suit of heavy combat armor. Its immense bulk and mass already exceeded Nitaa's body proportions.

As long as she suited up, no one would be able to tell if a giant or a dwarf was hiding underneath all of the layers!

"The core portion of Nitaa's shadow attire is so heavy that it has to be powered. However, only the most basic systems are running its servos. Crindon already went over its rudimentary software and found nothing amiss. You're welcome to check the heavy hardsuit for yourself if you want to be sure it's secure."

Ves nursed his head. He still ached a bit from the constant influx of knowledge. "I'll do it. I don't trust the makers of shadow attires to be completely honest. It's better safe than sorry."

Though it took some effort and a few hours of tinkering, Ves completed his inspection of the shadow attires without finding anything amiss. Both outfits worked as advertised.

Along with all of the other preparations they made, Ves felt secure enough to proceed!

Chapter 1459 Expanding Options

Ves had the illusion that he became a Shadow Courier once he sneaked out of the hotel with Nitaa and donned his shadow attire. The robe he wore resembled those worn by the messengers of dark economy.

In contrast to his modest bulk, Nitaa resembled a hulking giant. Her powered hardsuit clanked with considerable weight with each step she took. The robes covering up its precise contours hardly succeeded in obscuring its considerable size!

Unlike his own attire, Nitaa's shadow attire offered actual protection against enemy fire. Ves would have felt more nervous about this if he didn't wear his shield generator underneath the layers.

The two sneaked out of the hotel under the cover of his Stealth Augment and boarded a number of anonymous shuttles and shuffled back and forth across the surface of Cinach VIII.

The trips were lengthy and boring, but necessary. They had to wipe away the trail back to the hotel as much as possible.

Ves decided to make use of this time to increase his absorption of Senior-level Mechanics and Metallurgy.

He took in bits and pieces of both Skills at the same time. He found it more interesting if he shifted from topic and topic.

All in all, just like Senior-level Physics, the theories he acquired at breakneck speed tended to be very complicated, very abstract and of limited applicability.

The best way to describe these Main Skills was that they provided an increasingly more formidable foundation in their respective fields.

At the level of a Senior, the knowledge imparted by the System basically gave him an introduction in countless different Sub-Skills. Each different introduction was enough to deepen his understanding and application of the finer points of Mechanics and Metallurgy.

He could already imagine the results once he fully internalized the ocean of knowledge. His pivotal new Senior-level Skills not only boosted his ability to

design mechs in a holistic manner, but also opened up an incredible amount of new solutions to various rare problems.

With regards to Mechanics, Ves gained a much finer appreciation of the internal structure of a mech. Regardless of whether he designed a humanoid mech, an aquatic mech or a bestial mech, as long as it moved, Ves had many more ways to minimize the flaws and accentuate the strengths of the mechanical components of his designs.

"If I knew this much back when I was still working on the Devil Tiger project, I would have been able to make it a little bit more fluid." He muttered in his hardsuit.

Despite the gouts of new knowledge pouring into his mind, the difference it made to his mech designs was not that significant.

Novice and Apprentice-level knowledge formed the true foundation of his profession. Mech designers had to learn the most critical and the most fundamental theories upfront. What they learned afterwards were theories that weren't as universal and widely applied.

Therefore, even if Ves learned far more knowledge than he ever held about Mechanics, the true effect on the performance of his mech designs only amounted to an overall gain of five to ten percent.

Due to diminishing returns, it was difficult to squeeze out additional performance from a mech design! The further he progressed, the harder it became to achieve the same degree of improvement!

While Senior-level Mechanics improved his ability to design the interior mechanisms of a mech, the benefit he gained from Senior-level Metallurgy dealt with both the interior and exterior of a machine.

Different alloys possessed different properties. With so many diverse materials in existence, metallurgists and materials scientists invented new formulas and new applications all the time.

What Senior-level Metallurgy Skill granted him was more than instilling him with a list of known formulas and their properties. It granted him with the underlying foundation that allowed him to perform his own research on new metals and metallic exotics, with a focus on developing proprietary formulas useful to mechs!

With the influx of knowledge on Metallurgy, Ves realized that some Seniors felt inclined to shy away from third-party alloy formulas.

Apart from ensuring that their mechs performed at their best when paired with matching alloys, the main reason for doing so was to save on cost.

Certain materials and exotics were more prevalent in some areas than others. Relying on imported exotics to form the key components of a mech did not do its cost efficiency any favors!

Developing the skills to form his own alloy formulas also mattered for reasons other than reducing costs.

At the Senior-level, mech designers started to get really involved with designing mechs for high-ranking mech pilots.

The true power behind these incredibly sophisticated machines lay in their ability to resonate with expert pilots. The strategic inclusion of resonating exotics empowered the mechs with special abilities that warped reality by varying degrees.

Ves received an thorough introduction to resonating exotics during the entire knowledge transfer. An entirely new sphere of mech design opened up to him! He was no longer left in the dark when it came to designing expert mechs!

Not only that, but Ves also gained much when it came to designing standard mechs.

Certain materials resonated by themselves without the presence of a high-ranking pilot. Ves already encountered a number of custom mechs which incorporated a judicious amount of self-resonatic exotics to enable fake resonance.

The only downside to Ves was that resonating exotics and self-resonating exotics tended to be very rare. They were also in high demand as high-ranking mech designers heavily depended upon them to spice up their best mech designs.

The combination of low supply and high demand meant that the price for these materials was extremely inflated!

"This is the main reason why second-class mechs are so expensive!"

One factor that distinguished second-class mechs from third-class mechs was the former's use of self-resonating materials. Though used in only modest amounts due to economic concerns, the subtle boosts they provided distinguished these expensive mech designs even further!

If Ves was a second-class mech designer like Gloriana, then he would have learned some of this knowledge sooner. Not enough to allow him to develop his own formulas, but just enough for him to apply existing formulas in a skilled manner.

Ves shifted from his seat in the shuttle. His unpowered hardsuit did not exactly provide him with a lot of comfort.

"The amount of theories behind resonating exotics is so immense that I doubt Gloriana can match my prowess in this area. I'm probably ahead of her now in terms of pure knowledge!"

That was good news! The greater the disparity, the more assured he became!

He smirked underneath his helmet. If they ever collaborated to design a custom mech, then he would surely be able to surprise her with the added options he brought to the table!

Still, his ability to design a self-resonating custom mech or an expert mech was still limited. The introduction he received was at the level of a juvenile in the mech industry. He needed to supplement his foundation with more specialized Sub-Skills that delved a lot deeper into resonating and self-resonating metallic exotics.

"Outside of custom mechs and expert mechs, I'm not about to put this new knowledge to use anytime soon."

Self-resonating exotics promised to grant some of the prowess of expert mechs to standard mechs, but the prices for them were way too high.

While mech designers might be able to justify using the cheaper and more abundant self-resonating exotics in second-class standard mechs, there was no viable way to incorporate them in third-class standard mechs without incurring huge losses!

"I'll be pricing myself out of the market if I do so!"

For example, if he developed a variant of his successful Aurora Titan design that incorporated some basic self-resonating materials, its price would balloon by five times while only strengthening its performance by a fifth!

No sane third-class mech designer would ever accept such an inefficient tradeoff!

Instead of buying a grossly overpriced mech that only performed modestly better than a regular mech, mech buyers could instead opt to buy five normally-priced mechs with the same amount of money!

"These tradeoffs only make sense in wealthier states with more abundant supply of self-resonating exotics."

Not every second-class mech incorporated self-resonating exotics, but most of the mechs positioned in the upper end of the market tended to include them to varying degrees.

Second-class mechs designed in the Komodo Star Sector tended to be a lot more sparse compared to second-class mech designed closer to the center of the galaxy.

If Ves ever wanted to break into the second-class mech market, then deepening his knowledge on self-resonating exotics was a necessity. Otherwise, he'd be limited to designing the second-class equivalent of budget and bargain bin mechs!

While all of this sounded expensive, when utilized on a greater scale in states that were prosperous enough to afford this level of spending, the differences in might and versatility became evident!

This was why no one in the Komodo Star Sector believed that every third-rate state combined could overwhelm a single second-rate!

The gap in quality was too vast!

He sighed. "Sadly, these options aren't relevant for me right now. I'm still a long distance away from designing a second-class mech, and no expert pilot will entrust the design of a vital expert mech to an inexperienced Journeyman."

Perhaps his only opportunity to design an expert mech in the near future was to upgrade Jannzi's Shield of Samar if she broke through.

Ves believed that it wouldn't be long before she advanced to expert pilot. He knew that the design spirit of her mech already helped her once. Qilanxo's

spiritual fragment could easily give Jannzi another push if it thought she needed the help.

He had to be ready to transform the Shield of Samar into an expert mech by the time she became an expert pilot. He already began to form a list of what he needed to learn in order to become more rounded in his ability to design an expert mech. Resonating materials only formed one facet of an expert mech's remarkable makeup.

"Expert mechs form their own separate genre of mechs. They require vastly different approaches to their design."

Now that he took his first step into this field, he became aware of how little he truly knew about expert mechs.

A vast stretch of darkness still limited his options.

If he wanted to shine some light on the landscape, then he needed to become smarter and acquire more knowledge related to this field.

As Ves continued to muse about expert pilots, the anonymous shuttle finally arrived at its destination.

"We've arrived at the rendez-vous point, sir."

"Ah." Ves pulled his attention away from his considerations. "We're about to meet the middleman, right?"

"Correct. Please watch your words and actions when you step out. The less clues you give away, the less likely your identity is exposed. Don't mention any names and try not to mention anything specific to a particular state."

"I understand."

Their voices came out of their helmets with a considerable degree of distortion to further prevent anyone from figuring out their identities via voiceprint.

What Ves lamented the most actually was that he had to leave Lucky behind at the hotel again. The cat was simply way too tied to his identity for him to risk bringing into the Circle of Mota.

As Ves stepped out, he began to employ one of the extra measures he prepared to obscure his identity more thoroughly.

He began to don a prepared spiritual image as his mask. He infused it with a considerable amount of spirituality already, which strengthened his mask considerably.

His entire demeanor changed as soon as he stepped foot in the underground tunnel. Their surroundings were wide enough to run entire transports through the tunnels!

Wearing his shadow attire, Ves moved across the clearing with a measured, almost bot-like march.

His entire body language differed substantially from before. Almost every quirk and tell had disappeared since he donned his new mask!

The sudden change startled even Nitaa. If not for her huge hardsuit, her astonishment would have been obvious.

As it was, she managed to keep up a steady pace alongside Ves. It was as if the two were a pair of equals instead of master and subordinate.

They approached a single man awaiting their arrival at the other end of the tunnel.

Chapter 1460 Hot Smell

Unlike Ves and Nitaa, the middleman did not don any disguises. The man's messy brown hair fell from his head like a mop. The stubble on his jaw and neck hadn't been shaved in days.

Ves bet that the man's entire appearance and demeanor had been altered. With a judicious application of surgery and psycho-programming, transforming someone into an entirely different person was not as hard as it sounded!

"Are the two of you my clients for the day?" The man casually asked as he pushed himself off the shuttle he was leaning against.

Ves wordlessly withdrew a data chip from a pocket of his robes and slowly deposited onto the middleman's waiting hand in an unnaturally smooth motion.

The middleman frowned as he inserted the data chip into a slot on his secure comm. "Are you some kind of bot or something?"

"No." Ves answered with a monotone, distorted voice.

Nothing else followed, leading to an awkward silence.

Ves didn't care. The mask he wore dampened all of his outward expressions. He could never be too careful with obscuring his identity in this extremely risky meetup.

"Fine. Have it your way." The middleman shrugged. He encountered stranger people during these jobs. "At least the two of you are better prepared. You can't imagine the amount of idiots I've guided to the Circle who have done a shoddy job at disguising themselves. Nobles especially tend to be bad at it. It must be their huge egos."

"We did not come here to chat." Nitaa stated. "Please verify the contents of the data chip and bring us underway."

"Patience, patience! I can't simply roll up to the entrance of the Circle with the two of you aboard my shuttle! They'll blast us into pieces before we get close!"

Ves and Nitaa waited impatiently as the middleman began to send some codes to different addresses over the galactic net. Then he removed his secure comm, dropped it to the ground and crushed it with his boots.

"Alright, they know we're coming. Take a seat."

The shuttle's interior was extremely basic and barebones. The two sat down and strapped to their uncomfortable seats before the vehicle lifted off under the direct control of the middleman.

They soon navigated deeper into the seemingly-abandoned tunnel network. Actually, Ves had no idea where they were heading to, because the shuttle did not offer any windows or projections of the outside terrain.

In addition, the inertial dampeners of the shuttle were surprisingly good. Cheaper shuttles tended to make use of shoddily-optimized and incorrectly configured inertial dampeners.

Each time a cheap shuttle accelerated forward, Ves would get pressed into his seat. When the vehicle flew downwards, then Ves experienced the sensation of falling or lifting off from his seat.

That wasn't the case this time. The entire interior of the shuttle was completely geared towards keeping its occupants clueless of their route.

Ves couldn't even talk to the middleman as a solid hatch blocked the way to the cockpit.

The cramped and fully-sealed passenger compartment of the shuttle was no different from an isolation cell.

The only reason why Ves did not panic was because he possessed the means to break out of the shuttle. Along with the weapons that he procured from local sources, he could also rely on the Amastendira to break out of a sticky situation.

Of course, it would be better if he didn't whip out that distinctive and extremely flashy weapon. Ves could practically kiss his anonymity goodbye if he showed off his trump card weapon.

A speaker in the compartment started to transmit the middleman's voice.

[We're approaching the first checkpoint. Don't be alarmed when the exit hatch opens and a pair of inspectors come inside. They'll be probing the shuttle and inspecting your credentials.]

The hatch opened up soon after that. Two figures garbed in striped blue-and-white patterned robes entered the compartment.

Though Ves and Nitaa both tried to remain calm and seated, inwardly they were both on high alert.

The pair of inspectors did not bother with them at first. One of them entered the cockpit to speak with the middleman while the other inspector began to sweep the passenger compartment with a handheld multiscanner.

Even when the inspector pointed the device at the passengers, Ves did not make a move. The multiscanner's model was far too weak to penetrate the layers of protection of his shadow attire.

After the inspector put away his multiscanner and inspected the credentials that Ves handed over, he reunited with his colleague and departed the shuttle without speaking a single word.

Ves believed the shuttle started moving again, but the vehicle's incredibly effective inertial dampeners prevented him from knowing for sure! For all he knew, the shuttle had already entered a starship that was on its way to a completely different star system!

[We'll be doing this routine a couple more times. The Circle wants to be sure that we aren't bringing any trouble at its doorstep.]

The dance repeated several more times. Though the entire ride quickly became tedious and repetitive to him, he bore with it without any complaint.

He diverted all of his attention to absorbing the immense amount of knowledge continuing to integrate with his mind.

After an indeterminate amount of hours, the middleman finally spoke up for the last time.

[We're here. Don't be surprised when you step out and don't gape at the surroundings like a stupid fish. Move to the other end of the path and don't bump into anyone else. If you violate any rules set by the Circle, they'll shoot you before you can say a word.]

As soon as the hatch opened up and the two disguised figures stepped out, Ves understood why the middleman warned them not to gape.

They had emerged in the middle of a parking zone situated in an enormous excavated underground cavern!

Not only that, but rivers of magma flowed along the sides of the platform, following the carved-out paths that threaded through the entire temporary marketplace!

The enormous heat began to heat up their robes. If they didn't want to get cooked, they had to reach the other side of the path as soon as possible!

Ves and Nitaa quickly stepped across the narrow path leading to a massive entrance situated at the end of the cavern. They adopted the same pace as the other robes and disguised figures who were entering or exiting the premises.

No railings or any barriers lined the path. If he wanted to, Ves could easily turn to a passing bystander and shove that fellow a few meters to the side until the unlucky fellow fell into the river of magma!

Of course, the imposing guards would quickly shoot him afterwards, so he didn't entertain the idea any further.

Overall, he found the arrangement of this site to be clever. The natural flow of magma formed a natural and very effective shield against surface scans. Combined with other methods, it should be virtually impossible for the planetary authorities to find this site in a short amount of time!

Once they reached the massive, highly-guarded entrance, they offered their credentials one more time.

Under the watchful eyes of the pair of mechs standing on each side of the entrance, Ves waited patiently as the guards finally approved his entry.

"Please head inside."

As soon as they entered, they escaped the heat. A small underground city built from prefab modules entered his sights. Each structure hosted various shops, workplaces, storage sites and even living spaces to the people visiting or working at this bustling marketplace!

"Welcome to the Circle of Mota." A pretty guide greeted the pair of newcomers. "Do you require some guidance?"

"No." Ves curtly answered and walked away.

The less people who paid attention to him, the better. Even though the marketplace seemed overwhelming, he decided it was better for him to explore the place on his own.

Nitaa followed at his side. Different from his worries, her immense shadow attire did not attract a lot of attention. A fair number of visitors wore similarly imposing disguises.

While Ves immediately encountered a large variety of disguises or the lack thereof, the majority dressed like himself. With so many people wearing the

exact same hardsuit and the exact same robes, it became very challenging to keep track of specific individuals without electronic assistance.

Shortly after they headed inside, Nitaa momentarily halted. Through his spiritual senses, he sensed some alarm from his bodyguard before shifting into vigilance.

A solitary robed figure who was walking on the other side of the street halted as well. Both of them turned to each other and peered at each other's disguises.

"What is the matter?" He whispered.

A surprisingly large amount of visitors frequented the underground marketplace. Despite the traffic, not a lot of people spoke to each other or generated a lot of noise.

Nitaa replied with a code that they formulated and memorized beforehand.

"Code 23."

Ves grimaced underneath his helmet. Code 23 was a serious case. Nitaa eventually signalled to him that she detected someone of her own kind!

What was worse, the other person sensed Nitaa as well! Both of them appeared to share the same extraordinary smelling abilities and managed to spot each other!

This meant that the other person was definitely tied to the Five Scrolls Compact!

Of course, since everyone donned disguises, Ves didn't immediately panic. He waited patiently as Nitaa and the other figure exchanged brief hand signals to each other. The exchange only lasted for a few seconds before the other figure and Nitaa moved away.

Ves struggled to keep up. "What was going on?"

"Situation resolved."

"Anything else?"

"We detected each other's presence. The stranger detected you as well, though that is mainly due to your diet."

"Any problems?"

"Don't think so. Our ways are secretive and incomprehensible."

The Five Scrolls Compact and its splinter organizations tended to do a lot of crazy stuff. The researchers among them were also highly possessive about their personal research. Sharing was not in their nature.

"We still have a problem." Ves spoke.

"It depends."

"Inform me if another Code 23 occurs."

In hindsight, it might have been better if he came alone. He may have taken a lot of measures to obscure his identity, but it didn't do anything to block the damned extraordinary sense of smell developed by the Compact!

He became more urgent than ever to find a solution to the distinctive 'smell' he carried as a Holy Son!

One of his hopes for visiting this illicit marketplace was that he wanted to try his luck and see if he could find the source of geril space. He hardly knew anything about it even after adding it to his regular diet for several months.

What kind of plant did it grow from?

Why couldn't it be grown outside of the Nyxian Gap?

What was the reason for its overpowering stench that was effective enough to overwhelm the Compact's extraordinary noses?

Visiting this marketplace was the closest he would get to the Nyxian Gap. After he learned how dangerous it was to enter this perilous territory, he became more determined than ever to find a better solution to his predicament!

If some random Compact associate already smelled him out, then how much worse would it be by the time their bloodhounds deployed en masse?

"Is this a Code 1?"

"Uncertain." She replied. "Not enough information."

Code 1 applied when the Circle of Mota possessed active connections to the Compact. If that was the case, their visit here was like playing with fire!

Since Nitaa was still on the fence, Ves did not divert from his plans.

Both of them headed deeper into the marketplace. After orienting themselves a bit, they headed towards the section where all of the exotics and raw materials were being sold.

Ves immediately came into sight to an immense variety of exotics. Not even the Peacekeepers sold that much at their branch at Cinach XII!

Despite his emotion-dampening mask, a burst of eagerness encompassed his body as he slightly hurried towards the closest shop!