

Mech 1631

Chapter 1631 Meeting Between Men

A carrier that belonged to former BLM rebels made landfall on Cloudy Curtain.

Its arrival attracted a lot of attention!

If the government hadn't granted amnesty to the members of the BLM, the ship would have never been allowed to approach!

The detachment of the Mech Corps that had been dispatched to garrison the Cloudy Curtain System could only sit still while their former enemies paraded in public.

Before Ves met with Vincent Ricklin and his companions, he called Leland to his office to discuss the coming meeting.

"Vincent Ricklin has already attracted a lot of public attention." Leland told Ves. "You will have to watch your conduct whenever the two of you are in public. In fact, don't assume that you are free to do what you want when you are behind closed doors. Apparently, Vincent has hired his own media crew to manage his own media presence."

"You guys are just letting him do that?"

"As long as Vincent supports the deal the government has made with the BLM, it's not a bad idea to give him a greater voice. He's quite shrewd in that regard. He is willing to be used as long as he benefits in the process. It's a win-win situation to both the Bright Republic and himself."

Ves sardonically smiled. He wasn't the only one who learned how to cooperate with the government.

"It sounds like he's quite a shrewd guy."

"According to our investigation, Vincent hasn't been entirely onboard with the BLM's ideals. In fact, some of our analysts doubt that he even believed in its original cause." The Flashlight agent remarked.

"You mean he's just a scumbag who used the BLM for his own ends?"

"I wouldn't phrase it quite that way. He's an opportunist who has already abandoned ship once when his sister threatened his position in the Ricklin Family. We believe that Vincent has grown disillusioned with the life of a fugitive rebel. Living from day to day in a drab, underground bunker while worrying about the authorities catching up to him is not very pleasant."

That matched with what Ves thought of Vincent Ricklin. His initial reason to defect to the BLM must have been an act of desperation. He just wanted to get out of the clutches of the Ricklin Family, and the BLM was the only organization on Bentheim who dared to shelter him and offer new opportunities.

"Do I need to watch out for anything when I meet with Vincent?"

"I think it's best if I accompany you whenever you interact with him." Leland said. "The BLM is an old enemy of ours. I can help manage your interactions with their former members."

Ves ruffled Lucky's head as his cat dozed on his desk. "I suppose you also want to be present in order to keep me under control. You can't have me saying anything inconvenient."

The spy did not deny his accusation. "A lot of things can go wrong. Just consider me as insurance. So long as neither of you make any missteps, I won't have to intervene."

"Heh. Do you believe him, Lucky?"

His cat glanced up at Leland. "Meow."

"Yeah. I think so too."

"Please don't plot any violence against Vincent. He's already in control over a considerable number of mech pilots. By all signs, he is planning to form his own mercenary corps to maintain his grip on his subordinates. The mech he wants you to design is an important component in his plot. The more impressive his mech, the greater his ability to attract former members of the BLM under his banner!"

"That sounds dangerous."

Leland smiled. "He's a double-edged sword, but that is what makes him so valuable. Many of the former leaders and cadre of the Bentheim Liberation Movement are bitter fighters. They've treated the government as an enemy for decades, perhaps even their entire life! Even if they made peace with the Bright Republic, their long-held beliefs haven't changed."

"And Vincent is different?"

"He is. He's younger and he has only been with the BLM for less than a decade. Since he mainly looks out for himself, he isn't very attached to the old ideology of the BLM. Neither does he see the authorities as his enemies despite clashing with them several times."

Ves understood a bit better why Senator Tovar and the government placed so much importance in Vincent Ricklin.

This fellow was a sellout!

"How am I supposed to treat him, then?"

"Just act politely. Don't try to pull off any stunts or provoke any incidents. We don't need you to promote the amnesty deal either. Our main objective is to gain Vincent Ricklin's cooperation. We want to show everyone that Vincent and the former members of the BLM can successfully reintegrate into society."

That didn't sound very complicated. Once he finished his discussion with Leland, he moved down to the ground floor of the LMC's headquarters.

Due to the importance of the meeting, Ves decided to dress up in his full Pride of Dusk ensemble.

He briefly contemplated wearing his decorative cat ears, but he decided to keep them in his pockets. He did not wish to make himself appear silly in front of Vincent Ricklin.

Gloriana kept her own pair out of sight as well. She wore a professional business outfit that did not attract too much attention. She knew that it wouldn't be appropriate for her to involve herself in matters concerning the Bright Republic.

Their cats were present as well. Clixie sat next to Gloriana as if she was on guard.

Lucky meanwhile hissed at the giant mounted body of Zeigra had been placed in the center of the foyer of the HQ.

Ves looked up at the body of the former Crown Cat and had to admit it looked impressive.

In his first reunion with Vincent, he did not wish to appear weak. He wasn't the harmless mech designer he used to be back when he was a Novice all those years ago.

Just as Vincent changed, Ves had changed even more!

Some trepidation welled up within him as he spotted movement up front. The transparent front entrance slid open to allow a procession of wildly-dressed people to enter.

The thugs looked anything but professional. Wearing wild clothes that showed off their tattoos and piercings, the former separatists clearly used to be part of the lower ranks of the BLM's hierarchy.

While Ves ordinarily disdained elitism, he couldn't help but react the same as Gloriana. Both of them expressed some disgust at the sloppy appearances of Vincent's companions.

Of course, they quickly schooled their faces once they noticed all of the recorder bots floating around. Following behind them was a procession of journalists and media crew.

This first meeting appeared to be a very significant event. Ves understood a bit better why Leland insisted on being present.

He could really do a lot of damage if he said something wrong!

Emerging from the middle of the crowd of thugs was the star of the show. Vincent Ricklin, appearing much more buff and confident than Ves remembered!

As Vincent stepped ahead of his followers with a delightful grin on his face, Ves momentarily became overwhelmed by the manliness the former rebel exuded.

His greasy, dirty blond hair trailed messily over his shoulders. His tight black pants accentuated his powerful legs.

What was worse was that Vincent hadn't even bothered to wear a proper shirt! Instead, he wore nothing else on his upper body except for an unbuttoned vest!

His sculpted abs and chest were plain to see to everyone! Several recorder bots floated in a circle around Vincent, capturing all of his muscle definition in the highest fidelity they could manage!

"Hello there, babe." Vincent completely ignored Ves and walked up to Gloriana. "You smell as lovely as you look. How about I bring you back to Bentheim and show you around?"

Gloriana scrunched her face and deliberately leaned against Ves. "I have many obligations here. We must each do our part in the fight against the sandmen."

That was a very good deflection. Ves inwardly clapped his hands at her response.

Seeing that he encountered a tough nut, Vincent reluctantly left her be. Instead, he turned to Ves.

For a moment, they stared at each other. While Ves did not appear as outrageously handsome as Vincent, he did not consider himself any less of a man!

Ves quietly lowered the barrier to his Pride of Dusk, causing him to emanate a prideful and intimidating aura!

Vincent suddenly lightened up and whistled impressively. "Wow. You make me feel like I'm facing one of your Prideful Soldier mechs!"

Damnit. Ves recalled that he inserted a mote of Zeigra's spirituality in his Prideful Soldier design. Due to the Prideful Soldier's popularity among the former members of the BLM, Vincent should already be familiar with its glow!

Ves gradually toned down the aura emanating from his Pride of Dusk. He kept it at a low level in order to infuse him with some confidence.

"Welcome to the Mech Nursery, Mr. Ricklin."

"Heh! You've grown a lot! I remember that you used to do business at a tiny workshop when we first met. Now, look at you! According to the news, you're selling hundreds of thousands of mechs per month now!"

"My Soldier product line has been very successful."

"That's exactly why I want you to design my Adonis! Only you and your babe can design the mech that I've dreamt of piloting for so many years! I still remember the times when I piloted the Marc Antony you've built for me. I still regret losing it. Every other mech designer I've approached doesn't understand my needs as well as you, Ves!"

Calling his dream mech the Adonis already suggested something awful to Ves. He did his best to keep his expression under control.

"Let us proceed to my office and discuss the commission in detail." Ves suggested and glanced at the thugs he brought and the journalists following on his heels. "We can leave these guests behind."

Vincent shook his head, making his hair move exceptionally dazzling for some reason. "My buddies accompany me everywhere, and so do my personal crew."

"Are you really willing to discuss your demands for your mech in the presence of a recorder bot?"

"It's okay! My Adonis doesn't have any weaknesses!"

Ves wanted to palm his face.

Instead, he rigidly turned around and stepped to the elevator.

"Follow me, then."

Some time later, they moved into his office.

Fortunately, the presence of Nitaa and the guards of the Glory Battalion restrained Vincent's thugs. They silently slumped on the sofas after Vincent waved them aside.

However, Vincent's personal attendant as well as a recorder bot continued to accompany him as he sat down on another couch.

Ves sat down on the opposite side with Gloriana and Leland sitting by his side.

For some reason, Vincent kept sniffing the air as if he was enjoying the smell of Gloriana's perfume.

Ves decided it was best if they moved on to business right away.

"Tell me about the mech you want us to design."

"Ah, my Adonis!" Vincent excitedly exclaimed. "The idea is simple. I want you to design a hybrid mech that is similar to your old Marc Antony designs. I don't want the exact same thing, but something similar. Since I've promised to fight the good fight, my Adonis should be a spaceborn mech that is armed with several ranged options! I want my mech to come with shoulder-mounted missile launchers, wrist-mounted nail drivers and a badass rifle that can smash the sandmen with each shot I unleash!"

"That sounds.. doable, especially if the budget is still as generous." Ves cautiously judged.

"That's not all! The weapons of my Adonis are only one side of the coin! I also want it to be beefy and solid! It has to be able to take a lot of hits! Not only that, but it has to look good in battle! I want my mech to look masculine. I want its chest plating to resemble a muscle cuirass. Make sure its contours match my own muscle definition! It has to be a mech that perfectly echoes my own body!"

"Uhh.. okay..."

"Oh yeah, you can't forget about the most important component of all."

A very bad feeling overcame Ves. "Which is...?"

"Guess." Vincent teased as he leaned back and spread his legs.

Chapter 1632 Proof of Masculinity

Along with the rising prosperity of the LMC, its headquarters continually received upgrades.

Its defensive capabilities improved to the point where it could withstand a surprise from mechs. Its interior design also became more resplendent.

Ves always felt in control while he resided in his office. His company, his headquarters and his office reflected the wealth and power he accumulated since he became a mech designer.

Ever since Gloriana came into his life, he felt as if he was getting further and further away from his modest background. Though he grew rather quickly, his mentality still hadn't entirely caught up with his current level of strength.

His recent rise and change in status increased his confidence.

He dared to confront Senator Tovar directly in order to negotiate a more equal partnership.

He dared to design a mass market mech that exposed the glows of his mechs to a much wider audience.

He dared to design a marksman mech that depended solely on its design spirit to guide its targeting!

Now, Ves faced his latest challenge.

His office descended into silence as Vincent Ricklin arrogantly spread his legs.

Due to his tight black pants, a notable bulge outlined his lower waist.

Eventually, his sycophants rose their fists and hooted.

"WHOOO! Show them what you got, Vince!"

"You're a real man, captain!"

"True men come from Bentheim!"

Vincent Ricklin changed a lot over the years. Yet some things hadn't changed at all. In fact, Vincent's macho traits had grown more pronounced as he used his raw charisma and masculinity as a means to foster popularity.

With the recorder bot and media crew streaming everything on the galactic net, Ves was well aware that Vincent was playing to a crowd.

Unfortunately, that also meant that Ves could not smack Vincent in the face, though he really wanted to. This fellow deliberately made a show out of his demand!

Ves glanced to his girlfriend and became relieved that Gloriana did not react too strongly at Vincent's demand.

Since she student every mech that Ves had ever designed and built, she should have been familiar with the Marc Antony he customized for Vincent.

The only reaction she exhibited was a minor frown. As a classy Hexer, the vulgarity displayed by Vincent completely rubbed her the wrong way.

Perhaps other Hexers might find Vincent's bad boy behavior endearing, but Gloriana held much higher standards.

She noted that Ves paid attention to her and offered him a brief smile. She placed her hand on his as reassurance.

Seeing that Gloriana hadn't been tempted at all by Vincent made Ves pleased. He knew that Vincent would have never attracted her attention since he wasn't a mech designer, but who could tell how women thought?

"Mr. Ricklin." Ves began.

"Captain Ricklin. Well, former captain now." Vincent corrected him while he kept his legs wide and open. "I used to lead my own mech company, you know! Right now, I'm in the process of forming my own mercenary corps! Once you build my custom mech, my Ricklin's Rollers will truly take off! With my invincible Adonis, I'll lead my new band of brothers to fame and fortune!"

"To fame!"

"And fortune!" His goons echoed!

The camaraderie that Vincent enjoyed with his closest comrades surprised Ves quite a bit. While he was unquestionably the leader, he did not adopt a distant and imperious leadership style.

Instead, Vincent came across as one of the lads, but just a bit more exceptional. Ves understood a bit better how this former rebel managed to rise up the ranks within the BLM.

His immediate goals were clear. As one of the many cadre of the former BLM who received amnesty, Vincent had to start anew.

As long as he earned fame and glory in the Sand War, he would probably be able to attract a lot of former members of the former BLM!

The Bentheim Liberation Movement used to employ a lot of mech pilots. Tens of thousands, at the very least.

While their average skill level left much to be desired, many former officers and leaders of the BLM were scrambling to grab these mech pilots for themselves!

Vincent was just one of many former leaders. Though he became a lot more famous over the years, his foundation wasn't as substantial as the leaders who had been with the BLM for decades.

In order to overcome this gap, Vincent clearly aimed to show valor on the battlefield.

Mech pilots often worshipped the strong and brave! As long as Vincent made the right impression, his mercenary corps would probably grow to become a force to be reckoned with! As for what Vincent wanted to do next, Ves had no clue.

Understanding the context behind Vincent's circumstances allowed Ves to comprehend his client's demands.

"Vincent.." He started. "This specific demand of yours is in poor taste."

The half-naked man snorted and thumbed his chiseled chest. "So what? I don't care! I'm a man, and I'm proud of it! I fight best when I feel like a man! Do you know how many mechs I've tried out? None of them can give me the kind of satisfaction that comes with piloting your mechs! Your Blackbeak and your Prideful Soldier mechs are my favorites! No other mech designer can ever make me feel close to a man than your work!"

"Since you are already accustomed to those mechs, maybe we can—"

"NO!" Vincent roared. "Don't think about skipping the codpiece! I can't stand mechs that don't have a codpiece! Do you know the first thing I do when I obtain a new mech? I grab a couple of mech technicians and order them to install a codpiece! Even then, it doesn't really feel as if I am embodying a man in the form of a machine! It always feels as if my manhood is prosthetic! It's not good enough!"

"Vincent.. a humanoid mech isn't meant to be a literal stand-in for the human body. Mechs are machines that just happen to borrow some of the principles of a human physique. There is no practical benefit to adding a codpiece to a mech. Almost every mech pilot in existence has never issued a single word of complaint about its absence!"

Vincent huffed. "All of those ignorant men don't know what they're missing! They're pussies! At least I'm confident enough to show the ladies what I'm packing! Don't try to change my mind on this. Ever since I piloted my first mech with a codpiece, I have never gone back!"

"It's useless to argue any further, Ves." Gloriana sighed. "I've worked with many clients over the years. Some have.. specific demands that they can't find in a mass-produced mech. Maybe there is a very good reason for that, but it's not our job to judge the taste

of our clients. As long as the overall performance of a mech isn't severely compromised, it's best to accept their demands."

Her words reminded him that he should act like a professional. It was just that Ves got triggered whenever someone brought up codpieces!

He detested this useless addition to a mech! Mechs weren't living creatures, let alone able to procreate!

The codpiece was nothing more than a way to show off Vincent's masculinity and reinforce his manly ego!

Yet because Vincent cared so much about it, Ves really had no choice but to accept this demand!

Functionally, the codpiece itself was a useless component that did not add anything to a mech.

However, just like how Ves modified the Holy Soldier's external appearance to make it more appealing to the Ylvainans, not every cosmetic addition was useless!

Another way to look at it was that Vincent was a client who adhered to a religion. His religion centered around himself and his perceived manliness! The more his mech conformed to his ideals, the greater his fighting spirit!

Ves frequently studied the actual battle performance of the mech pilots of his products. He already collected an abundant amount of proof that the mech pilots of his products fought substantially harder than usual!

They fought as if their mechs were several times more expensive! The glows of his mechs achieve a similar effect to the confidence that mech pilots gained from piloting very powerful machines!

He sighed. "I'll do my best, though I won't make any promises."

"Good!" Vincent grinned, happy that he managed to get his way. He activated his comm and projected a very crude sketch. "This is what I've been working in my free time. What do you think?"

Both Ves and Gloriana tried their best to suppress their reactions.

As mech designers, Ves and Gloriana both learned how to sketch and draft a mech design.

Vincent lacked this training. What was worse was that he didn't possess a technical understanding of how a mech was put together.

The abomination of a sketch that Vincent showed off was incredibly skewed and uneven. The mech wasn't symmetrical. Its proportions were skewed. The codpiece looked out of proportion compared to the rest of the mech.

Perhaps the only point worth praising was that Vincent somehow managed to transpose a wireframe image of his well-defined chest and abs onto the front torso of the mech.

Other than that, the crude sketch was anything but a proper draft design.

Ves coughed. "We shall use your requirements as a starting point and a source of inspiration. Due to the complexity of your proposal, we will require a few days to interpret your description into a more refined draft."

"Fine." Vincent lazily waved his hand. "Don't take too long. The sooner I get my Adonis, the sooner I can beat the sandmen to a pulp!"

The discussion continued for a bit as Vincent added some other inane demands. Ves patiently endured this moment before Vincent finally said his piece and left.

Once Vincent and his entourage left the office, Ves sank down on the couch and let out a deep breath.

"What an infuriating man! What do you think, Gloriana?"

She smiled and stroked his hair. "I've encountered worse at Centerpoint. Vincent is just a boy pretending to be a man. The harder they try to show off their masculinity, the more insecure they really are. You don't have to compare yourself to Vincent. You're much more capable than him. According to his record, he's not even a good mech pilot."

That caused Ves to think over the mech that Vincent wanted them to design. "That's going to be a problem. If we leave out the cosmetic design of his custom mech, its technical makeup is already going to be complex. The hybrid mech he's asking for is going to be very difficult to design. He wants to stuff his mech with multiple weapon systems as well as strengthen its defense!"

"It'll be easier with our higher budget." Gloriana confidently stated. "In fact, I think this is a good opportunity to practice some of the second-class mech design principles I've taught to you. A lot of second-class mechs are similar to the mech that Vincent wants to design. The internal architecture of a second-class mech design is always more complex than the simpler ones that you're used to. Learning how to integrate many different components in a single frame is an essential skill for any second-class mech designer."

"I guess so." Ves sighed. "I just feel that Vincent doesn't really know what he's asking for. He needs a good dose of reality."

"It could be worse. Even without our generous budget, I think we could still make his mech work."

The so-called Adonis that Vincent demanded was a medium ranged hybrid mech that was suitable to be employed in assaults.

Vincent basically wanted to pilot a much better version of the Dawnbreaker and Novabreaker.

If not for the codpiece, Ves wouldn't have so many objections to this commission.

Seeing that Ves still had mixed feelings over Vincent's demands, Gloriana giggled and ruffled his hair some more.

"Don't worry, Ves. I'll take the lead in this design project. You should direct most of your time on designing your Ylvainan marksman mech. You're clearly more passionate about that project."

"Will you be fine with working with Vincent?"

"Designing the perfect vessel is my passion, Ves. I can handle a boy like Vincent."

Chapter 1633 Abusing Parents

Ves and Gloriana each devoted time on two separate design projects.

Ves mainly devoted his time on the Ylvainan marksman mech project. Though he started off with the intention of designing a commercial mech for the market, in truth it was more of a passion project.

"Have you thought of a name for this mech design yet?" Gloriana asked as they entered the design lab.

He nodded. "For now, I'm going with the Deliverer."

"That's.. a simple name."

"I contemplated other names such as Ylvaine's Punishment or the Sagittarius, but they're either a bit too heavy-handed or they don't send the right message. I think the Deliverer fits well alongside the Transcendent Messenger. They are quite related to each other. The only reason why I haven't decided to call it the Transcendent Deliverer is because their quality and performance is not worth a grander name."

"It's your choice." She shrugged. "So what is the idea behind the name."

??A Deliverer is a savior or rescuer." Ves described. "The word has a religious connotation. The Ylvainans have always regarded Prophet Ylvaine as their deliverer. Since the marksman mech I've envisioned is a mech that is directly tied to the Great Prophet, then calling it the Deliverer is fitting."

"Because this mech will deliver them from the threat of the sandmen, right?"

"Exactly. Maybe the Deliverer might be useful in other situations as well. While it's not a very resilient or mobile mech, it can still be a potent threat as long as it enjoys a lot of protection."

"Are you hoping that your Deliverer will continue to be useful after the Sand War?"

"I'm leaving that option open." Ves responded. "Since the Deliverer is my inaugural commercial mech design of the new mech generation, I don't want it to become irrelevant if we win the Sand War. I think the Ylvainans are more than willing to depend on the Deliverer if it shows its value against the sandmen. The only point I'm uncertain about is whether Ylvaine will continue to offer his support."

"He's one of the more benevolent proto-gods in your arsenal. I'm sure he's willing to do what is necessary to protect his flock. If not, you can always pull him aside and teach him a lesson!"

Ves sheepishly smiled. "It's not that simple."

Every design spirit earned a spiritual dividend. While Ves only employed a tiny mote of spirituality in the Holy soldier design, it still offered Ylvaine's spiritual fragment a connection to hundreds of thousands of mech pilots!

Since they all happen to be Ylvainans, the spiritual feedback between the mech pilots and Ylvaine's spiritual fragment happened to be substantially stronger than usual!

Every mech pilot resonated with the spiritual remnant that Ves had rescued and amplified. Such a strong reaction empowered Ylvaine's spiritual fragment to an enormous degree in the last few months!

Along with the benefits that the fragments already gained from its strong bond with the mech pilots of the Transcendent Messengers, Ves did not have the confidence that he could exert any control over the fragment anymore!

The only way he could overpower Ylvaine's spiritual fragment was if he borrowed the power of the F-stone.

Ves did not wish to do that. Not only would he ruin his relationship with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment, he would also waste a portion of the F-stone's formidable charge.

He still needed to keep its remaining charge in reserve in case Nyxie ever rebelled or something.

That reminded him of something. He excused himself from Gloriana for a moment and concentrated his mind and began to visualize the Desolate Soldier. He soon made contact with the Solemn Guardian and checked up its status.

Compared to all of the design spirits he utilized, the Solemn Guardian had grown to be the second-strongest spiritual entity under his control!

The continued success of the Soldier product line had benefited it enormously! The time when the LMC sold over a million Soldier mechs was near! Almost every state involved in the Sand War employed the Desolate Soldier or one of its variants!

While the average spiritual strength of every mech pilot was rather poor, the sheer quantity of people connected to the Solemn Guardian accumulated to an incredibly scary degree!

Was it any surprise that the Solemn Guardian grew to an incredible degree in a matter of months?

Ves was even worried that its growth had been too rapid. The only reason why he didn't express more concern was that its strength had already begun to level off. At a certain point, the spiritual product no longer benefited from a huge quantity of low-quality spiritual feedback.

He speculated that the Solemn Guardian had reached a limit or a bottleneck. The only opportunity for it to grow further was if it could forge a connection with an expert pilot.

Cases like Davia Stark who hid her expert pilot status and stuck to standard mechs were very rare. Most of the Soldier mechs were rather modest in performance, which meant that any sane expert pilot would never be satisfied!

Since Ves was scared of what would happen if the Solemn Guardian grew further, he was relieved that its strength had plateaued.

"How have you been? Have you made sure to direct the dividends in the right direction?"

The Solemn Guardian responded with a vague wave of emotion and meaning.

Ves slowly interpreted its response and found out that it still heeded his earlier instruction.

"I know you don't like it, but it's for your own good. Your other 'parent' won't hesitate to kill you and reclaim what is his if you land in his clutches."

After a few more inquiries, he became satisfied that nothing had changed since he last checked in with the design spirit.

When Ves first came up with the concept of spiritual dividends, he paid a lot more attention to the spiritual feedback between his spiritual products and their 'parents'.

Ves did not have to worry too much about his first spiritual product. Vescas, the design spirit of the Kinslayer custom mech he designed for Lady Miralix, only governed a single mech.

From what Ves had looked up in the news, Lady Miralix had long stopped piloting the Kinslayer. She instead put the mech on display at her mansion on Felixia.

"Maybe I should recall Vescas and put him to use elsewhere." He muttered.

He even contemplated recycling Vescas so he could employ it as the design spirit of the Adonis. It was a quick and convenient way to solve this problem.

However, his professionalism disdained such a lazy solution. For better or worse, the Adonis would certainly attract a lot of attention from the public. Leland already told him that the government planned to utilize Vincent and his custom mech in a lot of propaganda.

If Ves wanted to do a proper job, he could not afford to cut any corners.

"I should probably form my third spiritual product, then." He judged. "I have to make a new one so that it matches my vision for the Adonis."

He left that for later. For now, he wanted to confirm whether the Solemn Guardian had sent its excess spiritual feedback to the right recipient.

Ves originally formed the Solemn Guardian out of three spiritual ingredients. Nyxie was the biggest contributor, so Ves was always afraid that his spiritual product would secretly pass on its energy to the ancient alien spiritual entity.

When Ves inspected the Solemn Guardian thoroughly, he saw little sign of that taking place so far. Instead, most of the spiritual feedback went to Venerable Plinter.

Though Ves also possessed a connection to the Solemn Guardian, he did not benefit from spiritual feedback.

The attributes had to match.

The Solemn Guardian's attributes did not really have much relation to his own mix of attributes.

In addition, Ves suspected that the spiritualities of high-ranking mech designers like him weren't able to grow at all from external assistance.

From what he could tell, expert pilots and certain spiritual entities were different. Qilanxo obviously benefited most of all so far, and Ves had a strong suspicion that some of the expert pilots he sourced had grown as well.

Since Ves directed the Solemn Guardian to dump most of the spiritual feedback it couldn't handle onto Venerable Plinter, the expert pilot should have benefited considerably.

"Is that true, though?"

Ves hadn't really looked up on the consequences of making use of the spiritual fragments he borrowed from expert pilots.

Information on Venerable Fontain was classified. He already nagged Leland once and evoked a lot of suspicion. Ves knew better than to follow up on the expert pilot of the 8th Spiral Shockers.

As for the expert pilot who was responsible for imparting the duty-related attributes to the Solemn Guardian, Ves had not really paid that much attention to her since he returned to the Bright Republic.

"I hope she's doing well."

Ves activated his comm and tried to look up any news about Venerable Zoe Plinter.

"Ah, damn."

The Hertog Dominion had already started to succumb to the sandman invasion. The state was a bit more distant from the Bright Republic.

The Desolate Soldiers entered its mech market a bit late. The absence of his mechs and their helpful glows caused many citizens of the Hertog Dominion to flee the state even though it could still hold off the invasion!

"Well, the Dominator isn't entirely free from blame either."

Ves always had a poor impression of the Hertog Dominion in the brief time he spent there. The Dominator ruled Hertog with an iron fist and always suppressed his own subjects. Was it no surprise that most of its people held very little loyalty to the state?

A loyal and devoted expert pilot like Venerable Plinter was rare. Her strong duty to the state was a product of focused indoctrination. Her famed loyalty along with her

specialization were the biggest reasons why he decided to borrow a spiritual fragment from her so long ago.

Should he have been more concerned with her condition after he cut a portion of her spirituality away? Probably.

Did he care? Not really.

"The problem is that she's gone."

To be more precise, the news reports coming from the collapsing Hertog Dominion did not mention any word about Venerable Plinter.

As one of Hertog's loyal expert pilots, she always enjoyed some media attention.

Yet now, there were no more confirmed sightings of Venerable Plinter and her Crax Shooter expert mech.

"Did she die?"

Ves wasn't sure. While it was normal to withhold news of the death of an expert pilot from the public, his intuition suggested to him that it was not so simple.

Right now, the Solemn Guardian directed a considerable amount of spiritual dividends to Venerable Plinter. She received her own share as well as Nyxie's share, so her spiritual growth must have been quite significant if his theories were correct!

"This is a bit problematic."

He wasn't sure if she knew of her connection to the Soldier product line. If she suspected something, she might knock on his door one day, and she probably wouldn't be very happy!

"I can only hope she doesn't come." He muttered.

If nothing else, he would just have to rely on his Avatars and the formidable defenses of the Mech Nursery and the Cloud Estate to fend off a rogue expert pilot.

Ves shrugged off his concerns and decided to return to work. He still needed to refine the draft of his Deliverer project a bit further to confirm whether he selected the right components.

While he went back to work, Gloriana spent most of her time on preparing for the Adonis project. She dragged Vincent to the design lab and subjected him to a lot of scans and tests.

Fortunately, Ves had managed to convince Vincent to leave his entourage and his recorder bots outside!

A few days went by as Ves and Gloriana each worked on the projects they favored.

Chapter 1634 Expensive Mech

While Ves mainly worked on the Deliverer project, he did not entirely ignore the Adonis project.

The same went for Gloriana.

Both of them had to be involved in both projects in order to make sure they managed to achieve synergy when they moved on to the next design phases.

Gloriana's specialization required her to gain a thorough understanding of Vincent Ricklin's mind and body.

For this reason, Vincent became a regular guest of the design lab in the first couple of days.

Ves was deeply uncomfortable with letting Vincent inside the design lab. He could do a lot of damage if he wanted to. It didn't help that Vincent didn't shut up and frequently talked as he impatiently endured all of the tests and examinations.

"I'm bored here!" He shouted as his body was being subjected to a whole-body scan. "Is this what you mech designers are doing all day?"

"Please bear with it, Mr. Vincent!" Gloriana admonished from behind a control panel.

Different from the time they worked on the Resentful Soldier project, Gloriana had an assistant by her side.

Considering that it was important to gain an excellent understanding of Vincent's physical state, Ves suggested that Dr. Lupo should be involved.

Though Gloriana initially doubted Dr. Lupo, she fully became convinced in him after he showed off his expertise!

As Ves walked up to the control panel, he studied the readouts. He failed to interpret the data.

"What's going on?" Ves asked the exobiologist.

"We are almost done with measuring Mr. Ricklin's physical state." Lupo replied, making sure not to disturb Gloriana as she focused on manipulating the scanner machine. "It's

quite surprising how healthy he is. It's rare to encounter a baseline human body that has grown admirably fit through natural means."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Vincent Ricklin spends a lot of time on working out. While he has made use of supplements to enhance his muscle growth, it is not to the extent that he has become dependent on them. He hasn't augmented his body with any genetic treatments either."

"Of course not!" Their current client yelled. "I'm proud to be human! I hate it when people are trying to get ahead by turning themselves into half-aliens! Don't they realize that they're losing their humanity?!"

Lupo smiled. "Ah, a human purist."

The practice of augmenting someone by applying alien genes to their genetic makeup was not accepted by every human. Though Ves discovered that the practice turned out to be widespread among the upper echelons of society, most lower-class citizens detested the practice after it had almost led humanity to extinction during the twilight of the Age of Conquest!

In truth, Ves was not entirely unsympathetic of this ideology. If Dr. Jutland hadn't forcibly stuffed his body with enough alien-derived organs to turn him into a literal half-alien, he would have agreed with Vincent's viewpoint.

Unfortunately, the reality of modern society was that those who failed to keep up would always be left in the dust. By far, most mech designers who managed to become a Journeyman did so because they augmented their intelligence in some way.

Every other successful human relied on some form of implants or genetic treatments to become better at their jobs.

Fortunately for Vincent, mech pilots were less dependent on augmentations than other professions.

Skill, discipline and genetic aptitude determined the performance of a mech pilot in a mech.

The former two could only be developed through training and hard work while the latter completely depended on birth and early nurturing.

So whether Vincent Ricklin wanted to remain a baseline human or not did not matter that much in his career.

Of course, those who were willing to augment aspects of themselves still gained some advantages.

"How skilled is he in piloting mechs?"

Gloriana answered this time.

"To be honest, he's all over the place."

"HEY! I object to that, babe!"

"Quiet!" She hissed to Vincent before turning back to Ves. "According to his own words, he piloted a variety of mechs when he fought for the Bentheim Liberation Movement. He started off with your custom Marc Antony, then switched over to a spaceborn skirmisher before dumping it for a spaceborn rifleman mech. He then went back to piloting some landbound mechs such as a knight mech and a striker mech."

"That... is certainly a very colorful resume." Ves haltingly responded.

"I didn't always get the luxury to choose the mech I wanted to pilot! It's not like the BLM can enter a mech outlet in Dorum and order a batch of mechs to be delivered to our secret base!"

"Why did you pilot both landbound and spaceborn mechs, then?"

"I didn't have any choice! Whenever I spend too long on a hidey hole on the surface, the Planetary Guard eventually caught up to us and forced us to flee! Whenever I'm starting to get comfortable in space, the Mech Corps narrowed down our coordinates and forced us to lay low at one of our hidden bases!"

"It sounds like the authorities should have done a better job."

"Haha! I don't go down that easily, buddy! I'm stronger than you think!"

Gloriana shook her head. "I've already tested his piloting performance in simulations. He is passable in piloting most standard mech types, but his irregular training and experiences hasn't led to anything else."

"So he's basically a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none."

"Unfortunately, yes. The good news is that his ability to adapt will serve him well in piloting hybrid mechs. The bad news is that his lack of specialization won't produce excellent results in battle."

"That's what the Adonis is for, babe! What does skill even matter when I get a top-notch custom mech for free? I'll crush the sandman with my super-duper expensive Adonis! The sandmen are already getting beat by starfighters and budget mechs! Once a mech like my Adonis takes the field, the sandmen will get their comeuppance!"

Ves chuckled under his breath.

Neither Ves nor Gloriana thought highly of Vincent's statement. While it was true that relying on the superior capabilities of an expensive mech could compensate for lack of skill, in practice it was very reckless for someone to allocate an unskilled mech pilot to an expensive mech.

An unskilled mech pilot would never be able to leverage the full strength of a powerful mech! Not only that, their lack of skill and judgement sometimes produced openings in their piloting style which any skilled or clever opponent could exploit!

The usual outcome was that the expensive mech suffered a premature death! Easy successes that followed after crushing victories against inferior opponents always inflated the confidence of the unskilled mech pilot.

It only took one instance of underestimating a skilled opponent for the expensive mech to become scrap before it paid off its cost!

It was even worse if the expensive mech lost against a cheaper mech!

While the sandmen weren't comparable to mechs, they shouldn't be underestimated.

A blowhard like Vincent whose bark was bigger than his bite would probably get a rude awakening on the battlefield.

Whatever battles he fought while he was with the BLM didn't compare to the brutal battles against the sandmen.

Quantity mattered more than quality. While more expensive and resilient mechs survived longer, the sandmen sometimes employed exceptionally powerful laser attacks that devastated entire mech companies at once!

Against such firepower, not even an expert mech could guarantee its survival!

After Ves gained an understanding of Vincent's piloting ability, he left Gloriana and Dr. Lupo. He returned to his own corner at his design lab and sat next to Ketis.

"Hey, Ves." Ketis greeted him with a bored tone as she pressed her head against her hand.

"Are you still down about not being able to design a swordsman mech?"

She breathed deeply. "You don't have to be worried about me. I can take care of myself. Since there's little point for me to pursue my passion at the moment, I've been spending my free time on my studies."

"How far are you in your studies?"

"According to the virtual tests I've taken, I've reached the standard of a Journeyman for math, mechanics and metallurgy. Right now, I'm working on reaching the same level for physics and materials science."

Ves looked impressed. "That's really fast!"

She snorted. "Compared to your girlfriend, that's nothing."

"That's not a fair comparison, and you know it. You're a daughter of a frontier who grew up under difficult conditions. Gloriana was born with a silver spoon and received a lot of genetic treatments as she grew up. She even has an implant in her head that has boosted her cognitive abilities to a level that I don't even think I can catch up to unless I install my own implant!"

"You boosted my intelligence, right? When I found out that my learning speed has improved, I thought I caught up with the likes of you and Gloriana. It turns out that I've been really naive."

"Hey, you don't have to talk like that." Ves softly spoke and placed his hand on her solid back. "Don't forget that you're younger than Gloriana. Even if she was more impressive than you at your age, you're right at the point where Apprentices grow the fastest! As long as you work hard in the next ten years, I might congratulate you for becoming a Journeyman!"

"I don't know, Ves. You've directed a lot more attention to the new Tovar mech designers lately."

Ves frowned. "Stop that. I never meant to neglect you. It's just that I've already imparted most of the lessons I wanted to convey to you. For me to leave you on your own is a statement of confidence on my part. I trust you to handle yourself and complete your assignments without any hand holding. It's different for the Tovars. Even though they benefited from the orthodox education that you lack, their mindsets aren't as good and they don't really know what to do. I have to explain what I expect from them step by step, and that just requires a bit more time."

"I'm sorry, Ves. It's unfair for me to complain to you. I just miss the early days when we were together. With Gloriana and all of the new people in your life, I can hardly get a hold of you these days."

"Are you lonely?" Ves looked at her in concern. "Ah, you must be missing your fellow Swordmaidens, right?"

"I guess I am." She admitted. "I haven't spent this long away from the Swordmaidens since they first picked me up. Now that they're working for Calabast, they've gone to

dark, making it impossible for me to contact them. I don't even know where they are or what they are doing right now."

"You should make some more friends here. There are more people besides me and the Swordmaidens in your life."

"I know. I tried my best. I don't really get along with anyone else except Calsie. I tried getting along with the Larkinsons, but they're so rigid and proper that I've always felt awkward in their presence. The kids are cute, though."

"You don't have any other friends?"

"..I guess not."

This sounded like a serious problem. Ves figured he should really do something before Ketis snapped or something.

An idea suddenly came to mind.

"Maybe you need to spend some time elsewhere." Ves suggested. "Just like how I traveled to Centerpoint and went on a tour through the star sector, you should do something different in order to invigorate your passion and gain new inspiration. You can also make some new friends while you're spending your time away from Cloudy Curtain."

This time, Ketis looked intrigued. A bit of excitement suffused her mood. "Is that a good idea? Right now, there are two major wars going on in the star sector. It's not really safe for me to travel."

"You don't have to go on a tour like I did, Ketis. I think it's enough if you spend some time on an entirely different planet in order to enjoy some fresh new experiences."

"Where do you think I should go, then?"

Ves smiled. "Bentheim."

Chapter 1635 Deliverer

Ves tried to convince Ketis that she might benefit a lot from gaining experience in Bentheim.

"You have been under my wing for so long that you have exhausted what I can teach you for the moment." He spoke. "So it's not actually useful for you to remain at the Mech Nursery where you don't have a lot of opportunities to accrue experience. This is the shortcoming of residing in a former rural planet like Cloudy Curtain."

Ketis raised her hand and brushed her horns. "I'm not sure about this, Ves. I've visited Bentheim a few times before while you were on your tour. It's too crowded there. People are everywhere and too many of them look at me in an odd way."

"What you need is a friend. You don't entirely get along with the Avatars or Sentinels, right?"

She nodded. "They're not really my kind. They're too.. Rigid. Too proper. Too military."

"I have someone in mind who would make for an excellent host on Bentheim. Let me call someone and see if she agrees."

Ves activated his comm and called someone who he hadn't contacted in a while.

A minute went by before someone finally answered his call.

A projection of a woman in a blood-red piloting suit appeared. Ves immediately recognized the neural interface helmet as the model associated with his Soldier line.

"Ves! You sure picked an awful time to call!" Raella Larkinson complained, though her expression did not show much dissatisfaction. "I had to pause a live training session because of you! My men will start to think I'm going soft or something!"

He chuckled. "Oh, I'm sure that the big bad Raella can deal with such a trivial problem. How are you doing these days?"

"I'm still the same, mostly. If not for the Sand War, I would have continued to sharpen my dueling skills."

"Are you still a Blood Champion for the Blood Claws?"

She nodded. "Yeah, but all duels and most mech games are suspended on Bentheim. I've been focusing on training my mech company. Those Prideful Soldiers you've designed feel great, though a bit too fragile for my tastes. The Blood Claws are big fans of your work, though."

It didn't surprise Ves to hear that the Blood Claws liked his Prideful Soldiers.

"Don't you have the capital to pilot something better, Raella?"

"I'm a Larkinson, Ves. Everyone expects me to pilot your work."

"The Prideful Soldier is still a budget mech model." Ves frowned. "It only takes a couple of hits for a Prideful Soldier to go down! I would feel much more reassured if you piloted a Dawnbreaker."

Though he didn't exactly like the Dawnbreaker, from an objective viewpoint it was much better at preserving the life of a mech pilot.

Raella didn't look regretful. "It's fine, Ves. While I have my Larkinson training to count on, I'm not at ease in piloting spaceborn mechs. Maneuvering in three dimensions has never been my forte. As for my marksmanship... there's a reason I prefer to pilot skirmisher mechs. I don't deserve a Dawnbreaker. The Prideful Soldier is enough for me. Its glow fits me well."

"I can upgrade a Prideful Soldier if you want." Ves suggested.

Normally, he would never offer to do this, but Raella was family.

"I don't want any special treatment." She immediately shook her head. "People will think you're babysitting me if you give me a special mech. That's going to ruin my reputation in the Blood Claws. Piloting the Prideful Soldier alongside other Blood Claws is a way to prove myself. I need to endure the same hardships as the other Blood Claws in order to earn everyone's recognition."

That sounded similar to what Ves was putting the Avatars through. The problem was that Raella's life was much more valuable than the lives of his Avatars!

"You still have to prove yourself?" He furrowed his brows. "You've been with the Blood Claws for years and distinguished yourself in duels."

"Don't get me wrong, Ves. I did manage to prove myself. I enjoy a pretty senior position in the Blood Claws nowadays. It's just that this is not enough! I want to climb higher! I don't feel that I've reached my limit!"

"This.." Ves became speechless for a moment. "What is it you're working towards, exactly?"

She grinned. "I want to lead the Blood Claws!"

"What?!"

The Blood Claws was one of the three most dominant underground organizations on Bentheim! Calling it a gang was something of a misnomer because it was deeply rooted in almost every part of Bentheim's society!

Their influence and power rivaled that of the richest business magnates in the port system!

Trying to become the leader of the Blood Claws was like trying to become the planetary governor! Raella would have to distinguish herself over and over again in an attempt to

earn the recognition of the lower ranks while outshining her much more established peers!

"Don't try to argue me out of this, Ves! I'm already tired of Melinda's nagging. I don't need you to act as my nanny as well! I'm my own person! I can do what I want with my life!"

He knew very well how stubborn Raella could get. Just like him, she longed to be in control of her own destiny.

For that reason, Ves reluctantly decided to respect her wishes despite his worries. She might die trying to pursue her ambition, but she would never regret her decision.

Because this was what a true Larkinson would do.

"Let's talk about something else." He decided to change the subject. "I have a mech designer here who needs to experience something different. Come over here, Ketis."

With his introduction, Raella and Ketis smoothly got to know each other better. They already heard about each other, but never got the opportunity to talk.

Just as Ves expected, they quickly found a kindred spirit within each other. Both of them grew comfortable enough for Raella to accept Ketis in her crew as a guest.

Seeing that the two women managed to hit it off, Ves left them alone and turned back to his work.

While Ketis began to pack for her excursion to Bentheim, Ves refined the draft design for his Deliverer while locking in his vision.

"The Deliverer is a mech that brings salvation to the distressed by delivering punishment to the enemies of the Ylvainain Faith!"

If his Transcendent Messenger design represented Ylvaine's virtues, then his Deliverer design represented Ylvaine's retribution!

The offensive might of the Deliverer was terrible. Because Ves concentrated most of the Deliverer's budget in its gauss rifle and complementary systems, the Deliverer was capable of taking out much stronger opponents.

Even custom mechs like the Adonis that Ves and Gloriana planned to design might succumb after being targeted by a Deliverer in open space!

However, much of the potential of the Deliverer depended on the cooperation of its design spirit.

If Ylvaine's spiritual fragment did not agree with the actions of the mech pilot, the Deliverer would not benefit from its supernatural assistance!

Without this crucial interaction, the Deliverer could only rely on the skill and judgement of its mech pilot and its targeting system to land a solid hit.

Whether the Deliverer performed exceptionally or not depended on the whims of Ylvaine's spiritual fragment.

It should never be employed against fellow Ylvainans or those who weren't enemies of the Ylvainan Faith and its worshippers.

That constrained the utility of his Deliverer somewhat, but Ves did not mind this outcome. In fact, he preferred it because letting the Ylvainans abuse the Deliverer for unworthy ends was not its purpose!

The might of Ylvaine should never be squandered!

The majesty of Ylvaine must not be tarnished!

As Ves kept tweaking the Deliverer's draft design according to his feelings, his mood became more intense. His eyes burned like fire as he became more invested in realizing the Deliverer's odd but ambitious vision!

"Gloriana is right." He whispered to himself. "Designing the Deliverer has become my passion project."

He never felt as passionate and invested when he designed the variants of his Desolate Soldier.

He only felt this way when he was working on something new and innovative!

"Designing mechs similar to mechs developed by others is a waste of time! Only by designing something truly new do I feel worthy to call myself a mech designer!"

The competition in the mech industry was terrible. It was far too difficult for a mech designer to stand out from the crowd and publish a mech design that added value to the market.

Ves felt gratified that his design philosophy pursued a different direction than many other mech designers.

This was the main advantage of Class IX design philosophies! As long as a mech designer found a way to make them work, it was much easier to design something different from the norm!

"I was made for this!" He grinned.

The fiery passion that enveloped his body felt similar to the passion he felt when he designed the Devil Tiger!

Back then, Ves made some very bold design choices that turned his Devil Tiger into an unparalleled and unique machine!

"This is another chance for me to design a mech that has no equal!"

On a whim, Ves concentrated his mind on the Transcendent Messenger design and made contact with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment.

A tacit understanding formed between him and the fragment. Without exchanging any messages, the spiritual fragment extended some of its vastly-grown power to his mind through their intangible connection.

A sacred and solemn presence entered his body. In order to avoid disturbing anyone else, Ves isolated the presence in his mind by raising a spiritual barrier.

No one knew that his head became a carrier of a portion of Prophet Ylvaine's grace.

Ves did not let the prophet's influence take over and design the Deliverer in his stead. He knew he had to be careful and maintain firm control over the direction of its design.

A mech designer must always be in charge of his own work!

What Ves wanted instead was to gain a better understanding of Prophet Ylvaine and his values. He used his close mental and spiritual proximity to Ylvaine's spiritual fragment as a source of inspiration and a way to color his perspective.

After all, when it came down to it, Ves was not an Ylvainan. He did not grow up under the teachings of the Ylvainan Faith and lacked a thorough understanding of its values and ideals.

A good way to remedy this problem was to consult an Ylvainan or add an Ylvainan mech designer to his design team.

However, Ves only started the Deliverer project very recently. It would take too much time to recruit an Ylvainan mech designer.

He also didn't believe it was necessary right now.

Why should he consult a believer in the faith when he could access the original source?

Working directly in the presence of Ylvaine's spiritual fragment would bring him much closer to the essence of its faith than working with an intermediary!

"The modern incarnation of the Ylvainan Faith is different from what it used to be when the prophet was still alive. It's become more insular and less optimistic."

Working with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment was like returning to the roots of the Ylvainan Faith. Untarnished by an entire accumulation of selective interpretation and altered customs, the unquestioning beliefs emanating from his connection to the spiritual fragment felt remarkably pure.

Ves understood a bit why people took comfort in faith. The certainty exuded by it made him feel as if his life had purpose.

Of course, he immediately slapped himself in the face in order to avoid succumbing to indoctrination!

Prophet Ylvaine might have been able to hoodwink entire states into adopting his beliefs, but Ves knew better!

"Don't think of converting me to your faith, buddy! You're just a remnant that I picked up from the street!"

He returned his attention to his draft design and began to shape its cosmetic design.

Prophet Ylvaine happened to be a vain person when he was still alive! Since the Deliverer was meant to be a premium mech, it shouldn't look too shabby!

Chapter 1636 Random Day

Of all of the design spirits that Ves had in his arsenal, Ylvaine's spiritual fragment was the most human. It didn't originate from an exobeast like Qilanxo. It wasn't a spiritual product either.

Born in a different time and age, Prophet Ylvaine rose up in the galactic heartland to become a visionary to countless people who had lost hope during those times.

Though the prophet was long dead, Ves managed to revive a trace of his existence and amplify it into a powerful spiritual fragment.

While not as strong as the Solemn Guardian, Ves never underestimated it. Unlike the Solemn Guardian, In its role as a design spirit, Ylvaine's spiritual fragment formed a lot of intimate connections with its mech pilots.

"Every Ylvainan mech pilot is practical devoting their heart and souls to their faith!"

As a consequence, every Ylvainan mech pilot unintentionally aligned their thoughts and emotions to the mechs they piloted.

The Kronons piloting his Holy Soldiers fought harder and made better use of them than the Brighters piloting his Desolate Soldiers.

While there were many other factors that determined the performance of a mech, Ves believed that the close alignment between mechs and mech pilots allowed the combination to exert more power in battle!

"In a way, my methods and techniques are a lot more suitable in catering to a religious audience." He judged. "It's much easier to get mech pilots to adopt the right mindset for my products."

In comparison, the performance of his Desolate Soldiers were much more mixed. Skilled mech pilots still fared worse if they weren't compatible with the notion of duty.

This was why the Ministry of Defense suggested the Proudful Soldier variant. Brighters were a lot more diverse in their beliefs and attitudes.

"That's not to say that every Ylvainan is the same. It's just that they all share a strong and common belief among themselves that I can exploit for my own uses."

The Bright Republic was a highly secular state. While it developed its own identity and culture, Ves had to admit that giving every Brighter the freedom to decide their beliefs meant that his people did not share a single coherent identity.

That had always been something of a weakness to his home state. Even the Vesians were better in that regard.

However, the Vesians themselves mostly spent their time quarreling amongst themselves. The only time their nationalism became relevant was when they wanted to bully the Brighters.

In short, it was much harder to form a strong common identity in a secular state, especially if it was weak.

The Bright Republic was incomparable to greater powers such as the Friday Coalition.

The second-rate state that every Brighter looked up to possessed a much stronger identity. The Friday Coalition had to do so in order to form a united front against their rivals.

"Even so, the Fridaymen are still too diverse."

The Friday Coalition only formed as a response to the struggle of territory at the opening of the Komodo Star Sector.

A large number of refugee and colonization fleets flooded in the frontier star sector that the Big Two opened up to provide a new start to those that tired from the ravages of the Age of Conquest.

A lot of hopeful groups poured into the Komodo Star Sector despite its relative barrenness. Many people valued owning their own territories to govern as they wished.

An epic struggle for supremacy ensued. Lots of colonizing groups lost their strength or had been wiped out from existence!

The founders of the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom were just some of the losers who had been pushed to the periphery of the star sector.

After many chaotic years of struggle, the group that eventually went on to found the Hexadric Hegemony became the ultimate winner of this struggle!

The Hexers gained so much strength that no other surviving group could resist them by themselves!

The only way for the scattered and surviving forces to gain a foothold in the center of the star sector was to band together and unite their strengths!

That was how the Friday Coalition formed on a random friday.

"As a result, the Friday Coalition never formed a common identity aside from a strong hatred against the Hexers."

This made them less than ideal for his products. Ves could do so much more if he designed mechs for the Hexers. Their strong and distinctive identity made it easy for him to adapt his more daring ideas to their beliefs.

"Of course, there's also a downside to catering to a single strong identity."

The advantage of designing mechs for the Bright Republic was that his work would also be compatible with many other states.

It was different if he designed a mech that catered to the Ylvainans. Almost no other culture would accept a mech that Ves devoted to a specific religion!

The fact that Ves had to design a specific variant of the Desolate Soldier to accommodate the Ylvainans already signified the price he had to pay to appeal to a distinctive culture.

It would be the same if he designed a mech for the Hexers. Not only did he have to appeal to their strange beliefs on women, he might not even be able to get their attention!

After all, he was a man, not a woman!

"It would have been much better for me if I was still in the camp of the Fridaymen."

He glanced towards Gloriana who appeared to be engrossed in her examinations of Vincent Ricklin's properties.

Seeing her reaffirmed his love for her. He did not regret cutting ties with the Friday Coalition if it meant he could spend his time with a woman who complimented him well.

Thinking about his former ties to the Friday Coalition made him recall about his old contacts and friends from the second-rate state.

"How is Oleg doing these days?"

Ves recalled that Oleg advanced to Journeyman earlier than him, making him a true prodigy.

He decided to pause his work and browsed the galactic net.

"Ah, he already showed off his prowess?"

By now, the preliminary rounds of the Rimward Games were just taking place. This was a big event in ordinary times and if not for the wars raging in the star sector, Ves would have paid attention to this spectacle.

Millions of promising Journeymen had gathered at the center of various star clusters in order to make it through the qualification rounds. Once the mech designers made it through these grueling rounds, they were entitled to travel to the main planet where the Rimward Games would be truly held!

Due to the distances involved, this would take many years. If not for the assistance provided by the MTA and CFA, it would have taken several decades for the contestants to arrive at the main venue!

Ves looked up Master Olson next. Though she decisively kicked him out of her orbit, Ves never held any hard feelings about her decision. Both of them knew that it was for the best.

Sadly, the galactic net didn't mention much about her activities. The only solid lead he gained was that his old Master was working very closely with the Blue Cavalry, the mech military of the Vermeer Group.

"It makes sense that Master Olson has left Leemar to help the Vermeer Group." He muttered.

The Komodo War was incredibly devastating. Tens of thousands of mechs clashed against each other every day as the border systems changed hands every few weeks.

Master Mech Designers were supremely capable in designing mechs and should never be wasting their time on developing commercial mechs.

After all, in a war of this scale, the performance of military mechs decided its outcome!

Seeing that Master Olson was probably doing her best to help the Vermeer Group resist the Hexers, Ves no longer lingered on her and turned his thoughts elsewhere.

A name popped up. "I wonder how Tristan Wesseling is doing?"

The direct disciple of Master Katzenberg made a very strong impression on Ves back at Centerpoint.

What Ves found notable about Tristan was that he managed to earn the recognition of the Rim Guardians during the trials they held.

Regardless if Tristan was a Fridayman, Ves knew the man would probably have a bright future if he managed to deepen his connections with the Rim Guardians.

He impulsively decided to call Tristan despite how inappropriate it might be. He was sure that Gloriana would disapprove, but she didn't control his life!

It took some time before Tristan answered the call.

"Ves Larkinson." The other Journeyman's projection looked surprised. "I never expected you to contact me. This is not exactly the best of times. Is there something you want?"

"Ah, I just wanted to get in touch with you. It's been a while since we last talked with each other. I would have called earlier if not for all the wars that are taking place."

Tristan's face grew grave. "These are dangerous times. I've already heard how many people have died to the sandmen assaulting so many third-rate states. I'm sorry my people haven't been able to help."

"It's fine." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "You guys have your own war to fight. While none of us here are pleased that you Fridaymen and Hexers aren't willing to assist in the Sand War, you don't owe us in the first place."

"You don't have to massage your opinion of us, Ves. I feel bad for all of the deaths we could have prevented if we weren't so engaged in our own rivalry."

"Let's not go into this any further. We're both too small to affect the decisions of the higher ups."

"Good idea. How are your latest designs faring? I've heard that you've become a lot more prominent these days."

They revealed their latest works to each other. Tristan became very impressed with what Ves and Gloriana managed to achieve.

The Fridayman hadn't achieved any widespread success in the Coalition mech market. Of course, his mechs were much more sophisticated and the competition was much more intense.

Selling a couple of thousand mechs a year was already a considerable success to a Journeyman like Tristan!

"Right now, I'm still in the process of finding my own way. That's why my mechs aren't able to stand out from the market. Master Katzenberg's existing works and the works of her older apprentices are all crowding me out." Tristan explained.

This was a problem every mech designer faced when they inherited a design philosophy from another mech designer.

"What about the war? Are you involved in it at all?"

"Not yet." Tristan replied. "Master Katzenberg already arranged a cushy position for me. For now, she wanted to make sure that I still have an opportunity to take advantage of the new generation and publish a newer mech."

"You don't sound very hopeful." Ves pointed out.

"It's a bit difficult to stand out with a specialty like mine. I mostly excel in material substitution, so my mechs are merely cheaper than the competition. That's my only advantage."

That did sound a bit unfortunate to Ves. Competing on price was a race to the bottom. Competing on value was the true way to profit from the market.

Those who offered distinct advantages and unique features would always earn more fame and make more profit!

"Have you found a solution to your problem?"

Tristan nodded. "I've formed some ideas. The trial with the lithic mechs inspired me a lot. It made me realize that specializing in a certain type of materials can offer a

surprising amount of value. I've been researching all kinds of material types to decide which ones I want to orient towards."

"That sounds like a very major shift in direction." Ves looked surprised. "Are you really certain you want to alter your design philosophy in such a radical fashion?"

"There is no future for me if I continue to follow Master Katzenberg's footsteps. Just because I've become a Journeyman doesn't mean my choices are fixed. I can still pick the directions that my Master has turned away from when she progressed her own design philosophy."

What Tristan wanted to do sounded very dangerous! If he made the wrong decision, he might lead himself into a dead end!

Chapter 1637 Exclusive Incentives

Despite belonging to opposite camps, Tristan never treated Ves like an enemy.

He freely expressed his difficulties about his future direction as a mech designer to someone he wasn't close with. Ordinarily, an acquaintance like Ves should never be exposed to Tristan's deeper problems.

Of course, Tristan wasn't an average acquaintance to Ves. The Fridayman mech designer never dismissed Ves despite his humbler background.

Both of them still maintained the idea that it was better to deepen their connection to each other. Those who managed to pass the trials set by the Rim Guardians weren't ordinary in the slightest!

"Right now, I'm leaning towards specializing in lightweight materials." Tristan freely explained. "This is an area which Master Katzenberg has never excelled in. She focuses mainly on substituting more expensive materials for more affordable materials. Usually, that comes with a cost as the substitute materials are often inefficient, requiring more mass in order to equal the effect of the original materials."

Ves thought about what Tristan proposed. "Your rationale is certainly solid. However, I think that specializing in lightweight materials is more of a means than an end. I don't hear much of a direction yet. What ambition have you set? What dream do you want to realize?"

"That's why it's only a consideration. I haven't even figured my goal. Designing a mech with no mass sounds far too unrealistic to me. There is no way such a mech could ever exist!"

"Maybe you can make a mech out of light." Ves joked.

"Photons have energy, therefore they have mass. Besides, even if I manage to design a mech out of an even higher-level substance or energy, the mech pilot still possesses mass as well!"

"It sounds like you haven't managed to find an end goal that resonates with your desires. If you failed to come up with an ambition that you want to pursue after considering this direction for a time, maybe it??s not the right choice."

Tristan sighed. "You're right, I guess. When I initially became an apprentice for Master Katzenberg, I thought my future was already set. While I advanced smoothly to Journeyman, I never realized that the heirs of a Master Mech Designer don't have much choice in their future development until it was too late."

"Do you regret apprenticing under your Master?"

"Never! I'm very grateful to my Master. Without her assistance, I would have never advanced to Journeyman in my thirties! I know what I'm capable of. If I studied at Leemar without any strong backing, I would have been forced to scrape for work."

Just because Tristan was a Fridayman did not mean he was destined for success. Many graduates from places such as the Leemar Institute of Technology had to find their place in a vastly more competitive mech community.

Though Ves always lamented the limitations of designing third-class mechs, he had to admit it was a lot more easy to compete in this market.

Everyone knew that there was much more profit potential in designing second-class mechs. The differences were so vast that Ves estimated that the competition was at least ten times more intense!

Of course, once someone like Tristan found his way and achieved success, he would be able to earn vastly more profit than Ves despite selling much less mechs!

Ever since Gloriana revealed the 3-year deadline to Ves, he knew he had to become proficient in designing second-class mechs.

If Ves had a choice, then he would have preferred to stick to his roots and continue to excel in designing third-class mechs.

However, it wasn't necessarily a bad idea for him to expand his horizons and learn how to design a higher class mechs.

Considering his plans for the future, Ves knew that it would be best if he shifted his focus to designing second-class mechs.

Remaining in the third-class orbit was much too limiting to Ves. He wouldn't be able to accumulate much resources and grow his powerbase if he limited himself to third-class mechs and tech.

Even the strongest force of third-rate mechs could never defeat a vastly smaller force of second-rate mechs!

There was a limit to the potential of a third-rate force.

Since Ves wanted to upgrade his focus, he might as well discuss it with his current conversation partner. When he revealed his ambition to become a second-class mech designer, Tristan did not show any surprise.

"I always knew you wanted to climb higher." He smirked for a brief moment. "However, it's not necessarily a good idea to enter a height you aren't closely familiar with. Many third-class mech designers who emigrated to the Friday Coalition have tried and failed to stand out. They're too far behind compared to the likes of me who lived and breathed second-class mechs from birth."

"Gloriana already warned me about the challenges, but I'm confident I can manage. Part of the reason why most of those third-class mech designers stagnate is because they can't keep up with the cognitive augmentations that you rich people enjoy, right?"

"That's partially correct. However, even the third-raters who manage to earn a lot of financial support have failed to pay back their debts."

That reminded Ves of someone. "Do you know how Patricia Schneider is doing these days?"

"She's married now." Tristan answered. "She goes by Patricia Cain now. I haven't heard anything notable about Orlando Cain, but Patricia has become more notable these days. Master Null values her very highly, especially after she married and started to work harder."

"Is she still at Leemar?"

"No. Last I've heard, she followed Master Null to a secret location in order to work directly for the Carnegie Group. That's quite exceptional, you know."

"Oh?"

"Only direct disciples are entitled to become a part of the Carnegie Group's core design projects. She must have found some way to earn her Master's appreciation, though she is still a nominal disciple in the books."

That sounded unusual, but Ves didn't care too much about Patricia anymore. She was just an old classmate and acquaintance to him. He quickly moved on to something else.

"Let's get back to the original topic. What do you think I should prioritize if I want to compete in a market like the Friday Coalition?"

Tristan crossed his arm and fell into thought. "I'm not sure what advice you need and what I'm qualified to give. I don't really concern myself with third-class mech designers trying to climb up. Don't you have Gloriana?"

"She's a great help so far, but she only has a very limited exposure to the mech market. Her main business is designing custom mechs on commission. She has never designed a commercial mech or competed in the open market."

"I see." Tristan nodded. "Well, I think I can tutor you a bit on how to compete in a second-class mech market as long as I'm available."

That sounded like a significant favor! Ves lit up at the offer. This was exactly what he needed to become a qualified second-class mech designer!

However, he quickly calmed down. "What do you want in return for this favor?"

"You don't have to pay me back for now. Right now, I don't need anything from you. That might change in the future, especially if you manage to get closer to the Rim Guardians. How far are you in your assignment?"

"I've made some progress." Ves hesitatingly answered. "It's very difficult, but I'm confident that it won't take long for me to complete my mission."

According to the battlefield reports he received from the Avatars, Silent William was making quite a name for himself in the fight against the sandmen.

However, Ves didn't see any evidence that William Urbesh had reached the cusp of becoming an expert candidate.

Tristan offered Ves a rueful smile. "The Rim Guardians don't just pick anyone to become their associates. From the beginning of the trials, you're constantly being evaluated. However, as long as you succeed, you'll definitely enter their circle! Achieving this is worth sacrificing everything else!"

Both of them recognized the twinkle in their eyes.

"Are you thinking about becoming a galactic pioneer?" Ves asked.

"Who wouldn't in our places? We're not like the older generation who are content with their existing foundation. The risks of exploring the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy is much more interesting to mech designers like us who have much more to gain."

"Do you know what kind of benefit the Rim Guardians provide to mech designers who want to take part in the invasion?"

"You're talking to the right person." Tristan grinned. "While I haven't been able to collect a lot of information, I did manage to nibble out some information from someone who has already become an associate of the Rim Guardians."

That immediately startled Ves. He never thought that Tristan was so capable! I turned out that calling him was a good idea after all!

"What did you find out?" He hungrily asked.

"Well, the Rim Guardians have already unveiled a raft of programs to reward associates who contribute to them. Unlike the main organization, the Rim Guardians offer an expanded selection of assignments that you can fulfill in exchange for merits. You can also offer various goods and services in order to earn merits as well. In general, the Rim Guardians offer considerably more merits for the same kind of assignment, so there's no good reason to approach the main organization."

"This is because the Rim Guardians want to monopolize the contributions from their associates, right?"

Tristan nodded. "Right. It's a win-win situation. We get to earn more merits than normal, while the Rim Guardians get to receive lots of contributions that expand their power within the MTA."

"Is there any downside to ignoring the main organization?"

"Yeah. The level of contribution is a measure of your friendship with an organization. Currying favor with the Rim Guardians is only useful if you continue to interact with them. If you happen to end up in a place where the Rim Guardians don't have a presence, the MTA will be a lot more colder towards you. This wouldn't happen if you contribute to the main organization."

In essence, if Ves was more capable, then it was much more worthwhile to foster a relationship with the MTA as a whole.

"It's already hard trying to earn 100 million merits with the options that the MTA has opened up. I think I have much better luck if I continue to get closer to the Rim Guardians."

"You're making the right choice, Ves. I haven't mentioned the biggest reward yet. Earning more MTA merits is just part of the incentives they provide. The biggest one is the discount they provide!"

"A discount for what?"

"A beyonder ticket!"

"What?! Are you kidding, Tristan?!"

"I'm completely serious. While I haven't been able to verify this news yet, I have no reason to doubt my source! The Rim Guardians have announced that they are willing to reward excellent contributors with up to a fifty percent discount!"

"Fifty percent!" Ves gasped. "That means a second-class fleet beyonder ticket can be redeemed for 50 million merits!"

"I wouldn't get your hopes up so fast, though. The Rim Guardians won't hand out a fifty percent discount easily. They'll only reward it to associates who have contributed enormously or appreciate the most! However, it's much more doable for us to aim for a ten to twenty percent discount."

Ves calmed down after hearing that. A twenty percent discount already made his goal of obtaining a beyonder ticket within ten years a lot more easier!

"All of this hinges upon whether we can complete our initial assignments." Tristan shook his head. "As long as we can't get past the door, we'll be stuck outside."

"Yes. You're right." Ves sighed. "Are you thinking about earning a beyonder ticket for yourself?"

"I'm not sure." Tristan sighed. "I'd like to try, but it will probably take several decades, and that's only if I'm successful. However, there is talk about several potential expeditions. As long as the Komodo War goes against us, there are many people here who are thinking about making a new start..."

Chapter 1638 Machinations at the Top

The Big Two invested considerably in the invasion of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy. They considered a decision of such import carefully and made plenty of preparations spanning over a hundred years.

In fact, many analysts throughout the human space suspected that the Big Two plotted to conquer the Red Ocean right after the start of the Age of Mechs!

Unfortunately, human civilization had fallen into a low point at the time. Its internal state was so awful that an offensive action of this scale was highly irresponsible.

That has changed now. Human civilization had not only regained its strength during the height of the Age of Conquest, but also exceeded it by a huge margin!

The new order that emerged after the rise of the Big Two managed to foster a period of unprecedented peace in human space!

Though many people criticised the decision to rob the states of the right to field their own warships, it did manage to succeed in its main objective!

The transition from warships to mechs reduced the level of death and destruction in any human conflict to a minimum.

The galactic population of humans grew to a considerable degree!

Manpower formed the foundation of strength. With more humans born than ever before, their civilization finally gained the depth required to restart its offensive run!

The only problem was that human civilization still neighbored many hostile alien empires in the Milky Way Galaxy.

Would the rivals of humanity remain quiet as their mortal enemy gleefully raided the Red Ocean for phasewater?

"The implications of the invasion are very far and wide." Tristan told Ves over the comm. "While no one is sure how many forces the Big Two have committed to the invasion, it is undeniable that their strength in the Milky Way has declined!"

Ves nodded in agreement. "We've all noticed how the Big Two have become less active in this star sector. If the same applies to the rest of human space, then our alien neighbors might be getting some ideas."

"This is why we shouldn't assume that we are all safe back here in the Milky Way."

"What is the position of the Rim Guardians?"

Tristan grimaced. "The Rim Guardians aren't in a good shape, to be honest. If you think about it, who benefits more from the invasion, the Rim Guardians or the Prime Humans?"

It didn't take much guessing for Ves to come up with an answer.

"The Prime Humans are a faction based in the center of the galaxy, right? Humanity's strength there is at a peak. They're also tied to many factions, groups and notable

individuals from the first-rate states. This means that they are in a great position to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Red Ocean!"

"The Rim Guardians have always been the underdog within the MTA. According to my source, they highly disagreed with the decision to invade the Red Ocean. There are far more downsides than upsides to this invasion to them. Their strength is already strained by their obligation to protect the vast and dispersed regions of the galactic rim. They can't redirect too many additional forces to profit from the invasion of the Red Ocean."

"If they reduce their strength in the galactic rim even further, then they'll probably show enough weakness to tempt the aliens into attacking human space!"

Now that Tristan pointed out this circumstance, Ves filled in the gaps himself!

The Rim Guardians were really too disadvantaged compared to the Prime Humans!

What happened in the Komodo Star Sector already served as an example of the difficult position of the Rim Guardians! The MTA should have responded more forcefully against the sandmen if not for this recent initiative!

"The internal competition within the MTA is very severe." Tristan stated. "The poor position of the Rim Guardians have forced them to adopt a different strategy from the Prime Humans with regards to the invasion. If they let the Prime Humans dominate the Red Ocean, they'll probably balloon in strength once they obtain the bulk of the phasewater that lands in the hands of the MTA!"

That sounded like very bad news to Ves. The Rim Guardians appeared to be the only faction that supported the galactic rim and the most underprivileged citizens of human space.

Even if Ves managed to become a galactic pioneer, he would still be defined by his background in the Red Ocean.

Forging a friendship with the Rim Guardians was a way for him to build up solid backing for himself while he adventured in the dwarf galaxy. Without reliable support, Ves would never be able to move as freely as he wanted in frontier space!

For this reason, the relative strength and position of the Rim Guardians mattered a lot to Ves and Tristan. Due to his background, he had no chance in aligning himself with the Prime Humans.

"What are the Rim Guardians doing to narrow the gap?" Ves asked.

"Since they can't deploy too much of their own forces to the Red Ocean, they've decided to lean on their associates."

"Ah."

That made a lot of sense to Ves. It was akin to relying on mercenaries.

"The opportunities and rewards offered by the Rim Guardians are much more generous than the Prime Humans. This is also a reflection of their different bases of support. The Prime Humans are based in the most powerful regions of human space. The first-rate citizens that support them are mostly capable enough to obtain an individual or fleet beyonder ticket with their own strength!"

"So there is an opportunity for the Rim Guardians to narrow the gap by leaning on external help. However, I don't see how this is profitable. Associates like us won't work for them without remuneration. Phasewater is very expensive and highly desirable. If the Rim Guardians dare to exploit us, a galactic pioneer can always decide to sell their phasewater to the CFA!"

"They're not after immediate profit this time, Ves. They're opening their pockets to invest in the future. The Rim Guardians are fairly eager to befriend associates who will colonize the middle and lower zones of the Red Ocean. Establishing a presence in these zones will enable the Rim Guardians to benefit from much of the phasewater and other strategic exotics harvested in these territories in the future."

"That's.. kind of brilliant!" Ves perked up. "While the yield isn't very big, all of those future states in the Red Ocean will certainly look up to the Rim Guardians and the MTA! It's not quite the same when it comes to the future first-rate states of the Red Ocean. Many of them will doubtlessly be founded by the Terrans or Rubarthans, who never enjoy good relations with the Big Two!"

Tristan grinned. "The Prime Human Fraternity knows that. The activity zone system that restricts the actions of the galactic pioneers is one of the means they came up with to put pressure on the first-rate superstates. The weaker first-rate states that exist in their shadow will never allow them to grow stronger! By locking them all in the cages called the upper zones, the Prime Humans hope that the lesser first-rate states that they support will be able to gang up on the Terrans and Rubarthans!"

Ves had never considered these matters before. While he wasn't involved in the machinations at the top, the people at the bottom still felt their effects.

From what Tristan described so far, it was unlikely for the Rim Guardians to gain advantages in the invasion. Subsidizing and deepening their connection with associates so that they would conquer more territory in the Red Ocean was just a stopgap solution to stem the bleeding.

So even if Ves and Tristan benefited from this development, it didn't change the fact that they were essentially cozying up to a losing faction.

However, Ves didn't care so much. He much preferred to make decisions based on his current needs rather than his future concerns.

If the Rim Guardians fell out of power somehow, Ves had no qualms in jumping ship and finding another umbrella to shelter under. At that time, he believed that he wouldn't be a small and insignificant Journeyman anymore, so he should be able to partner up with plenty of other influences!

After centuries of dormancy, humanity had become proactive again and started to make some very big moves.

While many people felt uncomfortable that humanity has begun to take some risks, countless opportunities emerged as a result!

To those who were daring and adventurous enough to brave the risks, it was possible for them to change their lives and climb to heights that they couldn't have reached during peacetime!

"Risk is accompanied by reward." Ves summed up his thoughts.

Throughout their conversation, Ves and Tristan reaffirmed their tacit understanding.

Just like the partnership between Ves and the Tovar Family, he and Tristan both sought to hedge a position on the outcome of the Komodo War.

If the Friday Coalition won the war, Ves would become a fugitive in the star sector. While he didn't worry too much about himself, he didn't know what would happen to his family.

Having a friendly Fridayman on his side might be crucial in preserving the wellbeing of the Larkinsons loyal to the Bright Republic.

In the event the Hexers won the war, Tristan Wesseling would lose much of his foundation. If his Master couldn't help him out for some reason, then having Ves lend him a hand might be crucial in preserving his life and freedom one day.

Of course, the other reason why they wanted to remain friendly with each other was because they both wanted to support each other if they entered into the orbit of the Rim Guardians.

Once Ves ended the call, he leaned back and considered all of the news he learned.

"Tristan was oddly generous with sharing his information to me." He frowned. "That's not quite normal considering my current status."

Tristan was a second-class mech designer who directly enjoyed the tutelage of an esteemed Master.

While Ves believed his future was promising, he knew he did not merit any special attention right now. For Tristan to be so generous today meant he believed that Ves would do well regardless of which side won the Komodo War.

All Ves could conclude was that he would definitely return the favor.

Gloriana moved to him sometime later. She held a strained smile while she sidled up to his side.

"Melody told me something interesting. She told me you had a conversation with someone I'm not very keen on. Care to explain yourself?"

"I don't need to explain myself to you. I met Tristan before I met you. We both benefit from each other."

"Ves.." Gloriana gnashed his teeth. "If you wanted to befriend more second-class mech designers, I could have introduced you to some from the Hegemony! I have plenty of contacts in my Commbook!"

"Would they respect a third-class citizen and mech designer like me?" Ves pushed back.

That answer stumped her for a moment.

Though she valued him a lot, not everyone knew him as well as her and Tristan.

"I'm already working on overcoming their biases..." She muttered.

"That's not enough, and you know it. Every second-class mech designer looks down on third-class mech designers, and that is not entirely without merit. Regardless, even if I manage to earn their recognition, I still would have insisted on maintaining relations with Tristan. Befriending a Fridayman can come in handy in the Hegemony lands in dire straits one day."

She scowled. "You and your insistence on hedging your positions. Don't you have faith in my home state?!"

"I'm not a Hexer, Gloriana." Ves stood his ground with a smile. "And I never will as long as Hexers insist that women are greater than men!"

"But women are superior!"

Ves threw his hands up and turned around without bothering to reply.

On confrontations like this, they both decided it was best to agree to disagree.

Though Gloriana still appeared upset over her boyfriend's decision to associate with a Fridayman, she knew that Ves wouldn't change his mind.

Sometimes, she wondered whether she wanted Ves to become a Hexer at all.

Chapter 1639 Three Interpretations

A few tense days went by as Ves and Gloriana both concentrated on their work.

The Adonis project entered a new phase as Gloriana finished mapping Vincent Ricklin's condition.

As a client, Vincent was less than ideal.

His piloting skills reflected his scattered piloting experiences. His lack of specialization meant that he didn't possess any strong strengths, which was generally seen as a disadvantage.

"Vincent is versatile, but that's generally not a good thing." Ves remarked. "Perhaps it's for the best that he wants us to design a hybrid mech for him. He'll be able to compensate for his lack of exemplary skill by relying on the arsenal of his mech."

Gloriana, who sat next to him at the design lab, nodded in agreement. "While it's not a good idea for a mech pilot to rely on the features of his mech to cover for his shortcomings, it's the only way he can make achievements on the battlefield. It won't be very conducive to his growth, though. A mech pilot that lets his mech do the heavy lifting will never improve as fast as a mech pilot who has to struggle for every victory."

This was a very well-documented phenomenon. The quality and capability of a mech had to match the skill level of the mech pilot.

For example, it was fine for Ves to design a mech as fantastic as the Transcendent Messenger because he knew it would be paired with elite Kronon mech pilots.

This was different, though. The budget for the Adonis was just as much as the budget for a Transcendent Messenger.

Obviously, the people who arranged the commission wanted Ves to design a mech comparable in performance as the Transcendent Messenger. He already proved he was capable of designing a great custom mech at this price level, and with Gloriana's help the Adonis would doubtlessly be even better!

Unfortunately, how well did these bureaucrats and officials understand what was appropriate for Vincent Ricklin?

Ves and Gloriana wouldn't feel so hesitant about their budget if it was only half as much.

Contrary to what many people might think, mech designers did not necessarily insist on designing the most expensive mechs.

If a more powerful mech was paired with an awful mech pilot, then it was hard to bring out the full potential of the machine.

"Don't worry too much, Ves." She attempted to comfort him by patting his arm. "I've faced these situations before back at home. Few can resist the temptation of piloting an impressive mech. We just have to make sure that we design a mech that Vincent can grow into after being baptized on the battlefield."

"So the premise is to design a mech that is easy to pick up but offers a lot of room for growth, right?"

"Exactly. In case of a hybrid mech like the Adonis, we can just implement some limiters and lock some functions until Vincent has grown skilled enough to handle all of its capabilities."

While this solution wasn't perfect, Ves thought it was good enough.

If Ves designed a mech as complex and formidable as the Transcendent Messenger, then it was best to pair it up with a highly-trained mech pilot such as Taon Melin or Lord Javier of House Eneqqin.

Both of them were very talented in mech piloting and enjoyed some of the most rigorous training offered by their respective states. Designing a mech to such capable mech pilots was any mech designer's dream.

As for Vincent...

He wasn't as good in swordsmanship as a swordsman mech pilot. His marksmanship left much to be desired when compared to a marksman mech pilot. He wasn't as good in piloting skirmisher mechs as Raella Larkinson, and he definitely wouldn't be able to match Jannzi Larkinson's ability in piloting space knights.

There was nothing Vincent was truly good at, and that troubled the mech designers.

If Vincent wanted them to design a simple knight mech or rifleman mech, then they could have easily designed it with a low skill floor and a high skill ceiling.

Yet everything became a bit more complicated because Vincent insisted on a hybrid mech.

From a defensive standpoint, the Adonis he demanded resembled a knight mech or a heavy mech. Vincent clearly wanted a mech that boasted the maximum level of protection a medium mech could bear.

From an offensive standpoint, the Adonis relied on multiple weapon systems. Fortunately, Vincent hadn't set any priorities, so the main armament of the mech was clearly its Sandbreaker rifle.

Ves and Gloriana treated the missile launchers, wrist-mounted nail drivers and spare sword as auxiliary weapons. They didn't have to devote too much capacity to accommodate these secondary weapon systems.

"If you strip all of the frills from the Adonis, it's basically an armored rifleman mech."

"You could also call it a long-ranged striker mech, Ves."

"The point is that we should approach its design as a ranged mech that mainly relies on armor rather than mobility to protect itself. It's similar to the Dawnbreaker and Novabreaker in that regard."

Of course, with a budget as generous as theirs, the Adonis would definitely be paired with an armor system that could withstand at least twice as much damage!

After Ves gained a comprehensive understanding of the data that Gloriana gathered, they began to design a draft for the Adonis.

"Vincent clearly prizes the cosmetic design of his custom over its functional design." Gloriana explained to Ves. As a mech designer who designed many custom mechs, this detail hadn't escaped her notice. "So it is best to start sketching out the external appearance of the Adonis before we proceed with trying to fit components into the draft design."

Though Ves wasn't quite comfortable with that approach, he deferred to her judgement on this matter.

"Let me take the lead first. I'm very confident in my artistic capabilities."

Ves began to draw some lines on the projected design interface.

When Vincent initially described his demands and showed him his awful sketch of what he wanted his mech to look like, Ves already formed some ideas in his mind.

He did not adhere too closely to Vincent's poor drawing. An artist like Ves had his own standards and ideas. If possible, he wanted to push forward his own interpretation of how the Adonis should appear.

In fact, he developed several possible interpretations. Since he couldn't quite make up his mind on which one to go for, he decided to sketch out two more initial drafts after he finished his first work.

Gloriana mainly sat by his side while she became enchanted by his expression of art. Occasionally, she pointed out a problematic area or suggested some improvements, but she was content with letting Ves take the lead.

At the end of the drafting session, Ves managed to produce three distinctive depictions.

The first one shared a strong resemblance to the Marc Antony design. The similarities invoked some nostalgia within Ves. After so much time had passed, he returned to his very first commercial mech.

Perhaps Vincent would feel nostalgic as well when he saw this draft.

Of course, Ves did not copy the Marc Antony's external appearance directly. He was a lot more skilled and experienced than before. He worked away many of the faults he overlooked when he was younger.

He also adjusted the first sketch's contours and proportions to appear more like a sculpted human and less like an armored machine. He also shaped the front torso of the mech in the form of a muscle cuirass.

With all of the detailed scans that Gloriana had made of Vincent's body, it was no problem for Ves to transpose the contours of his client's chest onto his sketch.

"What do you think about this draft? I call it the Caesar version."

"It's very familiar. It's as if it's a spiritual successor to your Marc Antony design." Gloriana smiled. "Still, I don't think it's quite your style anymore. The Marc Antony is a variant of the Caesar Augustus, which is someone else's design. While the Caesar Augustus has definitely shaped the evolution of your design style, you are so much better now. This sketch doesn't do you justice."

"That's very astute of you." Ves agreed with her assessment. "The intention behind the Caesar version is to see whether Vincent appreciates the nostalgia of the Marc Antony design."

They turned to the second draft. This one possessed a different shape and proportion of limbs. Though Ves kept the muscle definition on the chest the same, he heavily beefed it up to make room for more armor and capacity.

The mech basically resembled a heavy-armored warrior. The thick protection for the arms and other limbs made them a lot more unwieldy, which was not desirable for ranged mechs. The extra armor also slowed down the mech considerably.

However, Ves believed its defensive capabilities were much more robust as a consequence.

"This is the Colossus version." He introduced. "It's the most defense-oriented draft of the three. It's actually the safest version of the Adonis since it's so well-protected. The downside is that it's slower, less precise and not as agile."

"The Colossus certainly looks imposing. If Vincent doesn't care too much about making actual achievements in battle, then this is the mech that fits him best."

The third draft was a slimmer mech than the previous two designs. Ves shaped it akin to an athletic runner's physique. While its armor was a bit less robust than the other drafts, it possessed a very sophisticated masculine charm.

"I'm not too sure whether Vincent will like this draft. I call it the Olympian version since it is an attempt to balance offense, defense and mobility. While it diverges a bit from Vincent's demand, it offers something the other versions don't, which is higher-than-average mobility."

The Olympian version was less massive than the other two versions. It also featured a larger and more powerful flight system. Its mobility clearly surpassed the others by a considerable margin.

"I think this is a step too far, Ves. Mobility is clearly not an overarching concern to Vincent, otherwise he would have mentioned it by now. I think it's good that you have offered an alternative, though. Personally, I prefer this Olympian version the most. It embodied your artistic style the most."

Once Ves made some last-minute adjustments based on Gloriana's feedback, the two called in Vincent to listen to his feedback.

"We have translated the visual design of your Adonis as best as possible. Which one do you prefer the most?"

It did not take much time for Vincent to make his choice. He immediately pointed to the Colossus version. "I want this big boy here! I like how much armor you've added to the mech! With a mech like this, I'll be able to laugh off the attacks of the sandmen!"

Both Ves and Gloriana looked at each other and frowned.

"The Colossus version is not a space knight, Vincent." Ves carefully reminded him. "If you choose to opt for this version, we'll make sure to offer as much protection as we can, but it won't be as good in withstanding enemy fire as a proper space knight with a shield."

Vincent showed no concern. "It's fine! This much protection is enough! I'll definitely beat the sandmen before they can break the armor plating of my mechs! That's a promise!"

Though Ves did not entirely have faith in his client's assertion, he was too lazy to correct it. If Vincent was so eager to suffer a loss in battle, so be it. Ves just wanted to get the Adonis project over with so he could get back to designing the mechs he truly wanted to realize.

"By the way, there's something missing here."

"What is that?"

Vincent pointed straight at the lower waist of the Colossus. "The codpiece! How could you draft such a manly mech but forget about the codpiece?! Do you think you can get away with designing a eunich mech for me or something?!"

Ves wanted to palm his face.

Chapter 1640 Dressed To Impress

The codpiece.

In an age long before humanity rose to the stars, men needed to protect their bodies when they fought in battle.

However, a codpiece did not necessarily encompass the metal cup that men adorned in order to protect their reproductive organ.

"From a historical context, any pronounced article placed in the crotch area is called a codpiece." Gloriana seriously described as she read through a historical article projected from a terminal.

Ves, sitting besides her, tried his best to keep his expression under control.

The encyclopedia article that Gloriana pulled up after their latest meeting with Vincent frankly embarrassed him. Did men in the past really wore outfits like this in polite society?

As a mech designer with a powerful cranial implant that boosted her cognitive functions, Gloriana's reading speed was incredibly fast. She scrolled through the article at a pace that even Ves struggled to keep up!

The only disturbing aspect about her studying pattern was that she paused and lingered at the images for an oddly long time!

Right now, she spent over two minutes staring at a painting of a well-dressed man in a baroque-like outfit. The orange doublet, the silky red undershirt and the flowing hose in the same color presented its wearer in a dignified manner.

The only issue that ruined any respect that Ves held for the main in the painting was the very pronounced bulge at the trunk! A distinct red codpiece in the same fabric as the hose bulged up to an exaggerating degree!

Ves felt so embarrassed by the sight that he couldn't stand the sight! How could any gentleman walk around and show off such an exaggeratingly padded codpiece to his peers?!

Worse, this was just one of many examples! He had encountered worse examples where the codpiece was practically shaped like a banana curving upwards!

Did the wearers of these codpieces truly needed so much room to accommodate their organs or were they just trying to misrepresent the size of their manhood?!

"This is quite intriguing!" Gloriana commented as she scrolled down the article only to pause upon a suit of plate armor. "Look, this is the codpiece of an ancient king who shaped human history!"

His face colored further as he took in the three-dimensional projection of an ancient monarch called Henry VIII!

In his eyes, the suit of armor looked quite valiant and formidable. Its huge left shoulder pauldron, its oval-shaped chest plate and its flexible lower skirt pieces or faulds granted it a lot of protection without immobilizing its wearer too much.

Yet the very pronounced codpiece sticking out from the middle of the faulds completely ruined the valiant and noble appearance of this kingly armor!

"Who is this Henry VIII, anyway?!" Ves couldn't take it anymore. "Is he a king or an insatiable beast?!"

Gloriana shrugged. "No idea. According to the article, his armor reflects the prevailing fashion during this time."

"Just look at how much it bulges out of the pelvis area! It's as big as the gauntlets that protect the hands! It weighs a staggering 1.31 kilograms!"

It was as if a clenched fist clad in armor stuck out from the lower half of the body!

While Ves looked sick from all of the obscene displays of manhood.

"Codpieces like this reflect a different time, Ves." She remarked as she glanced at Ves with an amused expression. "Back then, boys like Henry VIII ruled humanity. This is what happens when men are in charge of society. It's much better these days. At least half of the leaders in human space are women now."

"Well, codpieces are about to make another return in human civilization if we have to abide by Vincent's wishes."

Ves deeply wanted to keep this embarrassing ornament out of his design. However, Vincent cared so much about this idiotic component that he insisted that Ves and Gloriana added it to the Adonis Colossus design!

With such a very straightforward demand, Ves could no longer stall or shirk this demand.

This was the reason why he was studying the codpiece with his girlfriend. They needed to gain a thorough understanding of the codpiece in order to add one to a mech.

The first time he added a codpiece to a mech, he merely slapped a bulge to a customized Marc Antony design without much consideration.

That wouldn't cut it this time. The Adonis Colossus was going to be a mech that was destined to become famous!

The government's considerable interest in making use of Vincent's fame and platform meant that his custom mech would certainly feature frequently in the propaganda broadcasts.

Knowing how much Senator Tovar and all the other schemers in the government valued Vincent, Ves had a responsibility to make the former rebel seem as respectable in battle as possible!

This goal conflicted with Vincent's insistence on the codpiece!

No matter how Ves decided to shape the codpiece, a bulge in front of the lower waist section of a mech would always attract a lot of attention!

Because no other mech featured this useless ornament!

"Mechs are machines. What lies underneath their armor plating is a lot of metal, components and circuitry! There is no need for a mech to conform to every aspect of the human body!"

"The customer is king, Ves. As long as a demand is not excessive or impractical, it is our duty to implement it as best as we can. It's not in our place to judge our clients."

Ves sighed. "I know, Gloriana, but every codpiece that I've seen is in exceptionally poor taste in modern standards. I don't even know how you can keep together at the sight of so many exaggerated codpieces!"

She giggled. "I'm not offended by these sights. They're simply one of the many examples of how awful society was like when men were solely in power. That the leader of a country has participated in this trend in person exemplified the degenerate patriarchy that held our race back!"

To Gloriana, the depictions of codpieces in history reinforced her Hexer notions. Ves really had no good way to retort other than to say this period was far in the past.

"What men designed to cover their junk in the past is not very relevant to us." He spoke. "We should focus instead on what our own interpretation will be. Obviously, a contemporary version of a codpiece should not be as exaggerated as the ones we've seen."

Gloriana bumped Ves with her elbow while holding back a giggle. "I don't know, Ves! Maybe Vincent will take a liking for a fist or banana-shaped codpiece!"

"I'd rather die than design a mech with such a tasteless bulge in the lower waist!" Ves retorted!

He actually meant it! There was no way that Vincent would ever be able to persuade him to add such exaggerated codpieces to a product! His principles wouldn't allow it even if it was a direct demand from a client!

"You should lighten up, Ves. We don't have to adhere to a codpiece design of the past. I believe we can satisfy Vincent's desire without making our mech too shameless."

She swiped the article away and called up the draft of the Adonis Colossus.

The beefy hybrid mech with its thick limbs and frontal muscle contours looked incredibly masculine, just as Ves intended.

It was no surprise that Vincent Ricklin opted it over the other drafts that Ves prepared. The raw masculinity and power exuded by the Adonis Colossus was a lot more straightforward compared to the handsome but skinnier Adonis Olympian.

To be honest, Ves thought that Vincent's body shape matched the Olympian a lot better than the Colossus.

However, the Colossus offered a lot more armor and protection to the mech pilot, which Vincent evidently valued more.

Leland described Vincent as an opportunist, so it shouldn't surprise Ves so much that the former rebel preferred to pilot a well-armored mech.

"From the articles we've read, the codpiece was never truly about protecting a vulnerable organ." Gloriana lectured as she began to sketch a codpiece onto the draft design. "If armor and custom designers really wanted to offer some padding or protection to a man's junk, they can easily do so in an unobtrusive manner. For example, the faults of King Henry VIII's suit of armor could have extended over the entire pelvis area."

"Codpieces served as a fashion trend." Ves echoed the articles that they both read. "They're so pronounced because they were meant to attract attention. The underlying idea behind the codpiece is that it serves as a symbol of martial prowess and male virility. The reason why warriors added these stupid-looking codpieces to their suits of armor is because they wanted to show off their masculinity, equating it to their combat strength!"

"That's right. Don't you think that fits Vincent's motives well? He wants to add a codpiece to his custom mech for the same reason that those ancient chauvinists wore dome-shaped or banana-shaped codpieces in battle. Even though it looks as if it is incredibly uncomfortable to wear, they still insisted on it because they feel more confident if they show off their supposed manhoods!"

"People back then were ignorant."

The codpiece on the Adonis Colossus slowly took shape as Gloriana kept babbling her thoughts on this article. She understood that the codpiece was never about functionality. It was all about appearances.

"What Vincent wants is twofold, just like the boys who wore them in the past. The first thing they want is to show off their manhood. While the method is rather direct, I have to admit it makes for a powerful impression. The more his audience is impressed, the more Vincent derives satisfaction from their awe and attention."

"What is the second thing he wants?"

"The codpiece boosts his confidence and reinforces his ideal image of himself. He's a boy who thinks that the only way he can be a winner in life is to become as masculine as possible. Piloting a mech with a codpiece is a powerful talisman that makes him feel more at ease in battle. It's similar to how little children like to hug their stuffed toys at sleep."

Vincent probably wouldn't like Gloriana likening his precious codpiece to a stuffed toy. Too bad he wasn't here right now.

The codpiece that Gloriana sketched into shape looked quite tasteful to Ves. It looked anything like the obscene codpiece that extended out from the ancient suits of armor in a perpendicular angle from the lower waist.

Ves did not really object to this codpiece design. It fit rather elegantly to the Adonis Colossus. However...

"I'm not sure that Vincent will be happy with this design." He muttered. "It's too... understated. There is hardly any manhood being revealed by this flat and subtle codpiece. It looks more like a thick pair of underwear that a mech decided to wear on the outside of its pants."

It was the kind of codpiece that fit well with an exaggerated superhero outfit that often showed up in the action dramas.

"Hmm.. maybe you're right." She conceded.

She began to adjust the triangular-shaped codpiece downwards, making it appear that the wearer needed considerably more space to accommodate his manhood!

"How about this?"

The codpiece extended a lot further from the waist now. However, the ingenious part about Gloriana's adjustment was that it looked noticeable without appearing too obscene.

Ves genuinely praised her solution. "This is quite a clever implementation. The main problem I had with the codpieces depicted in the articles was that they stuck out like a very sore thumb. Now that you made the dangling part more triangular and pointed it downwards, it looks a bit more classier than I thought. It still looks offensive, but not to the point of shoving it in everyone's faces."

"I'm not sure if this is enough." Gloriana pressed a finger to her lips. "Maybe I need to add at least some curve to the front in order to provide the illusion of a bulge."

Ves and Gloriana continued to make adjustments for the rest of the day.