

## Mech 1891

### *Chapter 1891 Bargaining with a Boy*

With the MTA delegation due to arrive, Ves decided he should spend the rest of his remaining time on pre-surgery preparations.

At the medical facility operated by his charity foundation, Ves underwent a number of physical examinations. Various advanced devices scanned his entire body structure from top to bottom and took various samples.

"How am I, docs?"

"Your physical state is as vigorous as ever, sir." Dr. Lupo replied as he studied some sort of graph pertaining to his blood. "We are just performing this examination as a precaution. We have already planned and modeled our steps according to your last-recorded state. We are just looking for discrepancies at this stage."

Dr. Ranya Wodin grimaced. "Upgrading and expanding the capabilities of the centuries-old Archimedes Rubal implant is not without its consequences. While the bioimplant is considerably more powerful than before, it is even harder to perform the surgery without complications."

It was more than worth it, though. Once Ves gained some of the capabilities enjoyed by Gloriana and more, he would definitely be able to catch up to her progress.

Lately, Ves noticed that Gloriana had progressed her design philosophy by leaps and bounds! Witnessing the physical transformation of the Quint and studying the footage from every angle provided her with a huge amount of direction on how to attain the perfect vessel.

To be honest, Ves felt rather threatened by her recent progress. It would be a tragedy if Gloriana advanced to Senior sooner than him! Even if she promised to respect his wishes, Ves still wouldn't feel comfortable with a power dynamic that put her on top!

Ves was a man, damnit! He still had his own pride!

His drive to keep up with the competition compelled him to demand various upgrades to the Archimedes Rubal. No matter the cost, as long as it wasn't too risky, Ves wanted the best!

The current incarnation of the implant bore no resemblance to the original implant he found underneath a toilet in a cabin aboard the Starlight Megalodon. Three centuries of technological progress was a lot of time for bioimplant technology to develop many different innovations.

However, the tech disparity couldn't be defeated so easily. Even though it was horribly outdated, the biological structure of the implant incorporated lots of high-grade exotics that were only found in the galactic center! Each of them boosted the implants beyond the means of second-rate states such as the Hegemony!

Though the Archimedes Rubal turned into a Frankenstein-like abomination due to all of the upgrades and alterations, Ves didn't mind the deviations.

Implants, especially cranial implants, were notoriously difficult to remove once installed. The mental state of an individual could easily suffer irreparable damage if the implant had to be removed.

For this reason, cranial implants were pretty much regarded as one-way permanent augmentations. While it was possible to remove them safely, the cost was prohibitive and the risks were immense.

This meant that everyone had to make a careful choice on the cranial implant they wished to integrate. Once set, there was no going back!

Once the examinations finished, Ves met with Dr. Ranya and talk to her in private.

After asking some questions related to the Archimedes Rubal, he began to address another matter.

"Please help me understand your dynasty's current stance towards me. I'm not entirely clear what has changed."

"Gloriana has already explained that to you yesterday."

"I'd like a more detailed answer, and I don't think I'll get any straight ones from my girlfriend."

Dr. Ranya looked unamused. For a moment, her eyes sparkled with disdain. She quickly remembered that the boy in front of him was no longer an upstart from a lesser state.

Third-rater or not, even Ranya was aware of how valuable Ves had become!

Even if she was inclined to disregard his personal worth, Ves had proven to be a great companion to Gloriana.

Anything that benefited Gloriana also improved the fortunes of the Wodin Dynasty. Ranya no longer considered her current excursion to be a chore. She saw it as an opportunity to get close to the latest rising stars in the mech community and ride on their coattails!

Therefore, Ranya decided that she should do her best to conform to foreign standards and keep her opinions of boys to herself.

This was a very un-Hexer-like decision of her, but with so many opportunities at stake, she didn't care if she behaved in an undignified manner!

"As Gloriana's partner and principal enabler, our dynasty has recognized your importance." She explained in a plain voice. "When it is convenient, we will publicly announce that we will be backing you. This will grant you many advantages. For example, you are entitled to better treatment when you are residing in Hegemony-aligned lesser states. This is very helpful if you choose to travel to the Sentinel Kingdom."

"I see. What else is in store?"

"We are pretty content with your current relationship with Gloriana, so we want that to continue as long as the two of you continue to benefit from each other. We are willing to assist your professional endeavors and grant some favors to ease your rise in the mech community. The reinforcements we have dispatched is just the first step. If possible, we would also like to dispatch specialists and other assistance to you. We can even provide you with monetary grants or invest in the LMC or gift you valuable assets such as fully-functional starships."

Ves blinked. That sounded serious!

While Ves normally wasn't inclined to look at a gift horse in the mouth, it was a different story when the horse in question belonged to a Hexer breed!

"I've been doing so far on my own. Right now, I value my independence. I am not inclined to accept any further 'assistance' if it comes with strings attached. Have I made myself clear?"

Ranya pressed her lips. "Our Wodin Dynasty is committed to become your friend and ally. Please don't reject our generosity. Brutus and I are part of the package."

"I appreciate that, but the Larkinson Clan and I still wish to maintain control over our own destiny. Let's make one thing clear, doctor. I do not intend to become a member of the Wodin Dynasty."

"Understood.."

Though Ranya obviously had a lot to say about that decision, she refrained from voicing them. This was unprecedented! She couldn't remember when she had ever reined herself in because of a boy!

Throughout the conversation, Ves made his stance clear. While he didn't refuse the Wodin Dynasty's goodwill, he did not wish to lose his independence!

While Ves knew that the power disparity between himself and a mighty dynasty from the Hexadric Hegemony was still considerable, it was better than before!

At least now he possessed value that was impossible to replace! This improved his bargaining power to the point where he actually felt bold enough to negotiate with the Hexers!

His gamble seemed to pay off. Ranya, far from pushing back and attempting to assert Hexer primacy, instead gave ground to most of his requests and demands.

It was a surprisingly refreshing experience. It wasn't every day that a boy managed to get a female Hexer to compromise!

While Ves wasn't entirely sure if Ranya was able to speak on behalf of the entire Wodin Dynasty, he decided to give her the benefit of the doubt for the moment.

Once he gained the answers he wanted to hear, he left the medical facility and spent the remainder of his time preparing to welcome the incoming MTA delegation.

He changed his clothes to a more formal outfit prepared by Gavin to reflect his raised stature.

Though Ves briefly contemplated wearing his Pride of Dusk, considering that the delegation would likely include a mech designer, he decided to leave it in the closet.

"Do you think the delegation includes a Master Mech Designer?" Ves asked Gavin as a bot styled his hair.

Gavin shook his head. "Most of the Masters employed by the MTA in this region reside at the sector headquarters in the Centerpoint System. From what I've managed to gather, those Masters are rarely stationed elsewhere in the star sector."

That meant that the delegation likely wouldn't include a Master.

This was a bit of a letdown. Ves and Gloriana practically broke records when they managed to make a masterwork mech! Such an amazing accomplishment deserved to be noticed by the MTA!

On the other hand, maybe it was for the best. From his own interactions with Master Olson, Ves learnt that mech designers at his exalted height were very astute.

There was no telling what a Master could figure out when he personally examined the Quint!

In the worst-case scenario, the Master might discover that there was a huge issue with how Ves and Gloriana managed to make their masterwork. If the MTA deduced that the pair relied on external methods to forcefully elevate the quality of their mech, then that would spell deep trouble for them both!

Though Senior Mech Designers were quite observant as well, Ves believed it was a lot easier to keep them in the dark. The gulf between a Senior and a Master was immense! The two didn't even belong to the same species at all!

Once Ves completed his makeover, he began to head to the exit, but paused.

He turned around and looked at the floating Larkinson Mandate. This book continued to radiate a powerful glow that affected its entire surroundings!

Though Ves, Gavin, Lucky and everyone else around them had already become accustomed to its glow, the same could not be said for the MTA delegation!

In order to avoid any unfortunate incidents, Ves grabbed the Larkinson Mandate and put it in his assistant's hands.

"It's not very convenient for us to dangle this book in front of the faces of the MTA envoys. Please bring it to Raymond for safekeeping, Benny. I trust he will keep it safe."

Gavin frowned as he accepted the large and sturdy book. "Are you sure, boss? They say that the one who holds the book possesses a mandate to command the Larkinson Clan!"

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "Raymond won't try anything when I'm around. This is just a casual phrase. Book or not, I'm still the clan patriarch!"

While his assistant reluctantly brought the book away, Ves picked Lucky up and boarded a shuttle that brought them to the Avatar base.

There, Ves joined Gloriana in waiting for a ship that was about to descend from orbit.

"Are you nervous?" Gloriana curiously asked as she adjusted her ocean blue multilayered dress.

"I'd be lying if I say no. My relationship with the MTA is.. not as simple as you think."

"Oh?" Gloriana raised her eyebrow towards him. "What's wrong? Have you been naughty, Ves?"

Ves smiled sardonically at her. "I wouldn't put it that way, but I would highly prefer it if you take the lead in our upcoming interactions with the MTA. For various reasons, the

less they know about my design philosophy, the better. I also don't want them to snoop too much in my other affairs."

"Okay. I'll do my best to attract their attention."

The time had come. In the distant skies of Kesseling VII, Ves and Gloriana noticed a small object among other objects in the sky becoming larger.

An MTA frigate-sized vessel cut through the air with such speed that it could have been mistaken as a destructive asteroid if not for the transponder broadcasting the ship's identity!

A pair of grand multipurpose mechs escorted the rapidly-descending ship without showing any difficulty in keeping up! Once Ves and Gloriana used their comms to zoom in on the mechs, they both became fascinated by their design!

"What a powerful mech!" Gloriana sighed. "I've seen better at Centerpoint, but this design is truly outstanding in its own way! It's so rugged!"

Rugged was a good way to describe the model of the two mechs. Ves had an impression that the large and well-equipped mechs were capable of operating in any environment, including underwater or in a gas giant environment!

Choosing to arrive at the site of a pair of young and unconfirmed masterwork mech designers with such an escort was a powerful statement.

Masterwork mech or not, the Quint was still vastly inferior to the first-class mechs flanking the MTA frigate!

This was the power of the MTA! In terms of quantity and quality, nobody in the galaxy could possibly equal its might!

Even a pair of exceptional mech designers had to bow their heads in front of one of the greatest powers in human space!

*Chapter 1892 Moira Willix*

Compared to the impressive multipurpose mechs, the starship they escorted looked a lot plainer.

She was a simple frigate tasked for passenger transport and courier service. While Ves noticed several distinct ports that likely hid potent ship-based weaponry, he had seen much more impressive ships from the MTA.

The ship landed at the designated landing zone with just a featherlight landing. The huge and imposing mechs that towered over all of the mechs of the Avatars landed alongside the frigate and ceased moving.

Soon enough, a passenger hatch opened up from the side of the frigate. A fairly small delegation consisting of half-a-dozen well-dressed individuals alongside an equal number of armored guards emerged and floated down to the ground.

As Ves directed his attention from the ship to the party that he was about to greet, his eyes widened as his intuition jolted him for some reason!

When Ves slightly concentrated his mind and activated his spiritual vision, he practically blinded himself by looking into the approaching sun!

This strength! This radiance! This awe-inspiring presence! Most of all, it was all contained within a very tight package!

Ves had never seen this magnitude of strength from anyone other than the likes of Master Olson!

No! This was different! One of the envoys in the MTA delegation was not just Master Olson's equal, but surpassed her somehow!

"Careful!" Ves hissed to Gloriana with a soft but nervous whisper. "One of the people who are about to greet us is a Master! Watch your words and don't reveal more than is necessary!"

Gloriana jerked her head. "Huh?"

They didn't have any time to exchange any further words because their guests had already arrived!

The guards accompanying the envoys looked incredibly formidable. There was no semblance of opulence or vanity in their armored appearances. Every aspect about their combat armor exuded pure functionality and lethality.

Ves had the impression that these suits of combat armor were even capable of fighting against the mechs fielded by the Avatars of Myth!

He didn't know why this thought occurred to him, but he sensed extreme threat whenever he cast his eyes on these silent but imposing guards!

The unarmored individuals looked completely different. Not a single one of the men and women standing before Ves and Gloriana looked anything but impeccable.

Their rich business garments were decked with all manner of frills and decorations. The prominent symbol of the MTA adorned all of their chests, making it clear that each of them represented the powerful organization with pride!

Of the six, it wasn't immediately clear which one was the Master. If not for his spiritual senses, Ves would have dismissed the woman standing in the back of the group!

It was not until the party hovered close enough to greet the pair that the Master finally came forward.

One peculiar detail about the new arrivals is that none of them bothered to walk on the ground. Instead, they continued to rely on their antigrav modules to hover just above the surface!

The middle-aged woman that came forward possessed a mild face and soft, brown hair that trailed just past her shoulders.

Despite her unimposing physical stature, there was a sense of presence around her that made her appear larger than life.

Her presence, though initially unnoticeable, became more evident by how the rest of the envoys regarded her with great respect!

"I am Master Moira Willix of the Komodo Branch of the Mech Trade Association." She announced her identity with a calm but compelling voice. "I believe the two of you have applied for a masterwork certificate, am I correct?"

For a moment, neither Ves nor Gloriana responded. They were both unprepared to greet a Master! How could one of them be bored enough to linger in this region and be on hand to join this delegation? It made no sense!

Gloriana recovered faster than her boyfriend. "We are the Journeymen who have sent the applications, Master. We are honored by your presence! I am Gloriana Wodin, and this is my boyfriend, Ves Larkinson."

The Master curled her mouth, showing a sliver of amusement!

"Interesting. You are oddly respectful to your boyfriend, Miss Wodin."

"He deserves it, ma'am."

"It's not every day I see that from a Hexer."

Obviously, Master Willix had prior interactions with the Hexer. She wasn't completely detached from the Komodo Star Sector.



While Gloriana appeared to be getting along with Master Willix, Ves continued to feel uncomfortable in the presence of such a powerful individual.

Meeting a Master Mech Designer from the MTA was one of his worst fears! There was no telling what Master Willix might find out! Ves was practically sweating in his boots!

"Mr. Larkinson. You seem ill at ease." She swept her powerful eyes towards Ves, pinning him with a piercing glance!

Ves awkwardly smiled. "I genuinely did not expect to be graced by a Master Mech Designer for what is just supposed to be a simple verification process."

"This verification process is anything but simple." The Master replied. "The news of your applications, once they were deemed credible, sparked a small storm at Halcyon Citadel. If your claims are true, then you stand to become the youngest masterwork mech designers of this star cluster. This will bring a considerable honor to our branch. It is therefore of utmost importance that we thoroughly confirm that your mech is a masterwork and that the two of you are responsible for building it. I took a portal jump straight to this state to catch up as soon as possible."

"Portal jump?" Ves asked.

"Portal jumping is an alternate method of FTL travel. I believe the CFA's Archangel Battle Group has once demonstrated some time ago when they arrived at the capital planet of the sandman civilization. The range and capabilities of portal jump technology are considerably better than conventional FTL drives. There are limitations as well, though, but that is not relevant for today."

This sounded expensive! While the MTA was more than capable of bearing this burden, the urgency revealed by Master Willix meant that Ves and Gloriana attracted far more attention than they anticipated! This was not good news!

The arrival of a Master completely upended their plans. Neither Ves, Gloriana, the Avatars and everyone else knew what to do. Should they invite the Master to a banquet or something?

There was a very high chance that a Master from the MTA would scoff at the poor and feeble dishes that Dr. Lupo and the other chefs were able to serve. None of their ingredients would ever be able to equal anything such a vaunted Master partook on a daily basis!

Somewhat outside of their expectations, Master Willix defied his impression of an arrogant and demanding elite.

She waved her hand. "I do not wish to delay this matter any further. Please lead me to the mech in question. You named it the Quint, right?"

While Ves and Gloriana began to walk with their cats in tow, the MTA delegation quietly floated alongside them. None of the other people accompanying the Master spoke up during this entire time!

"Correct." Gloriana answered with a smile. "We came up with this name to represent the partition of our modular mech platform."

"It is quite daring of the two of you to tackle a modular mech platform at your stages in your careers. Usually, only Seniors begin to design such mech platforms."

"We only designed four configurations, which limits the complexity of the project. We were confident we'd be able to complete the design within three months!"

"That sounds quite impressive. It is clear that your respective foundations are solid." The Master said and looked around at the other mechs in the Avatar base. "These other mechs are each impressive in their own ways. Though simple, I see a mastery in the physical and the immaterial that is very hard to find in other native Journeymen."

"Thank you for the compliment, ma'am!" Gloriana ecstatically grinned at the praise! "We strive to improve with each mech we design! While we can't claim to have attained perfection, we are approaching it step by step. Turning the Quint into a masterwork mech is the biggest leap I have made since I started my mech design career!"

"Keep up the good work. You have a bright head on your shoulders. Despite your difficult design philosophy, you managed to find a right direction that suits you most. From our studies, only mech designers who genuinely believe in their own design philosophies are able to create masterworks. One cannot be present without the other."

As they approached the underground chamber which held the Quint, Ves remained demure and tried to attract as little attention as possible.

He was glad to see that Gloriana successfully managed to draw the Master into a conversation!

Knowing Gloriana, she was probably ecstatic at meeting a female Master Mech Designer. If the MTA sent a man, then she would have been a lot less enthusiastic.

Whether by coincidence or on purpose, the MTA dispatched one of their female mech designers from Halcyon Citadel!

Right now, Gloriana acted as if she had met one of her idols! She didn't need to force herself to draw the Master's attention. Her exuberance and enthusiasm was all she needed!

Ves carefully observed the Master while they entered a lift that slowly descended below the ground.

After several minutes of observation, Ves suspected that Master Willix was likely a rational mech designer!

Her relative calm, her mild demeanor, her measured handling of Gloriana and several more indicators all shared some points of similarity to Master Olson and Patricia Cain!

Ves wasn't entirely sure what this meant. Rational mech designers weren't necessarily scarier than passionate mech designers. However, their rational perspectives and relative open-mindedness made them very suitable in analyzing the works or design philosophies of other mech designers!

The MTA hardly could have picked a better individual to examine the Quint!

Ves continued to feel nervous. He wasn't sure what Master Willix might pick up, but the chance of finding problems in the Quint was very considerable!

What should he do? Knock her over the head?

Impossible! A Master like her most probably wore a very powerful shield generator and other protective measures! Her guards alone would vaporize his body before he got close!

Attack her spirituality?

Ves inwardly laughed with despair. The powerful spirituality contained within the Master's mind was immensely more powerful than that of his own! He wasn't even sure if he could make a dent in Master Willix's spiritual presence with the help of his F-stone!

It didn't take much thought to conclude that he had no choice but to allow the Master to perform a close examination of the Quint. Ves could only roll with the punches and hope that Master Willix wasn't interested in the mech beyond the fact that it became a masterwork.

"The Bright Warrior design your Quint is based upon appears to be a private mech design. It is regrettable that the two of you have declined to submit your work for validation. Even if the two of you have no plans to sell any mechs based on this design, it is still useful to validate your work. Would you like to present your design to us? We prefer to determine the baseline performance of your mech design before we compare it to the performance of your masterwork."

"Okay." Gloriana chirped, and immediately activated her comm to transfer some very critical schematics to Master Willix!

Ves raised his hand and opened his mind before withdrawing. He did not wish for those root design files to be spread! The Bright Warrior was an exclusive mech design that was solely reserved for the Larkinson Clan and his other organizations!

The two women didn't seem to care, though. Gloriana smiled happily as Master Willix studied the projection alongside the other envoys of the MTA.

For some reason, Ves felt as if the Master was gleaning every possible secret from his latest mech design!

Master Willix curiously hummed. "This is interesting. There is a powerful property in this mech design that isn't caused by any of the design elements contained within these schematics."

"That's because it hosts a proto-god!"

"Proto.. god?"

*Chapter 1893 Crazy Ha*

Ves had been keeping an eye on Master Moira Willix, both visually and spiritually.

To host an august Master from the MTA was a supreme honor to any mech designer. Gloriana certainly looked as if she was having the time of her time!

Such supreme existences occupied the upper echelons of the mighty organizations. From what Ves had read, not only did they enjoy access to some of the best resources the trans-galactic organization could provide, but also possessed real decision-making power!

The higher ups of the sector branches of the MTA often influenced the local trends in mech design. While Ves wasn't aware of how much say Master Willix possessed, he bet that she must have certainly made many decisions that steered the Komodo Star Sector in different directions.

No Master from the MTA was average!

The senior leadership and the best mech designers of the MTA not only augmented themselves to outright superhuman levels, they had access to the largest and most extensive body of knowledge in humanity's possession!

The MTA was a hoarder of knowledge. Anything related to mech design inevitably fell into its hands. The knowledge and expertise that Master Willix possessed was probably considerably more than 'native' Masters such as Carmin Olson!

What made Master Willix even more formidable than Master Olson in his perspective was the disparity in their ages.

While it wasn't polite to ask the age of a lady, Ves definitely picked up the sense of wisdom and timelessness he was used to seeing in centuries-old monsters.

Compared to an old fossil like Senator Tovar, Master Willix exhibited a bit more vitality, so Ves estimated her age to be around centuries, give or take fifty years.

This range was already pretty scary to Ves! In his experience, the older someone became, the more they saw through the truth of many matters!

That wasn't all.

Master Willix appeared to belong to a special and rare breed of professionals that happened to be one of his worst nightmares.

She was a rational mech designer.

Oh, she wasn't completely emotionless. Master Willix smiled and indulged Gloriana with the attitude of a teacher checking up on the progress of a favored student.

Yet there was no doubt that Master Willix possessed a calm, controlled and rational mind.

Now that Ves knew what to look for, he noticed that her potent spirituality was both tightly-controlled and very stable.

No matter what mechs came into view, Master Willix studied the Blackbeaks, Crystal Lords, Desolate Soldiers and Deliverers with measured eyes.

It was as if she was dissecting all of his mech designs on the spot!

The notion that a Master possessed the ability and aptitude to decipher all of his works and designs down to the intangible was extremely unnerving to Ves! How could he possibly outwit a mech designer who was older and better than him in almost every aspect? The amount of mechs she designed or examined must have probably reached five or six digits, if not more!

When Gloriana showed off the Bright Warrior design to Master Willix without any scruples, Ves almost had a heart attack.

When his girlfriend mentioned the dreaded P-word, Ves knew he couldn't avoid the elephant in the room any longer.

Inwardly, he sighed. It looked as if he needed to put on the crazy hat again. Why did he constantly end up in situations where he was forced to pull the wool over the eyes of the Big Two?

At least he came prepared. Ever since he learned that an MTA delegation was on its way to examine their purported masterwork mech in person, Ves took the time to

construct a meticulous mask and infused it with a considerable amount of spiritual energy.

This mask was very similar to the one he wore when he paid a visit to Halcyon Citadel and espoused his misleading views to Professor Kastel Oodiv.

Of course, this one was much more thorough. The extra time and attention he put into constructing this mask would hopefully make it foolproof enough to deceive one of the most observant individuals he had met so far! Just the thought of trying to fool a Master who was high up in the Association's hierarchy sent shivers through his spine!

Fortunately, Ves was a Larkinson! Courage and boldness in the face of overwhelming danger was a congenital trait as far as he was concerned!

The moment he donned the mask over his mind, much of his apprehension and uncertainty disappeared.

One of the defining traits of his spiritually-empowered mask was that it preferred action over hesitation!

If Ves had to lie or speak misleading statements, then he needed to do so with absolute confidence! As long as he came across as a true believer, it would be hard for others to get past his defenses!

Ves could only hope right now that Master Willix would become just as perplexed as Professor Oodiv back then. As a rational mech designer, it was virtually a given that she was a secularist!

The MTA despised religion, dismissing it as outdated superstition!

Yet humanity and human civilization was far from done with faith! A significant chunk of humans still believed in something greater, and that made organizations like the Big Two extremely helpless!

"Proto-gods is the term we've come up with to describe the life we have birthed in our mechs and mech designs." Ves answered smoothly.

Now that he donned his latest mask, he straightened his back and exuded the demeanor of a true believer!

Ves took a lot of inspiration from fanatics like Dr. Jutland, the worshippers of Haatumak and Gloriana!

The best way to sell his act was to believe in his nonsense wholeheartedly!

"Interesting." Master Willix responded as she turned her full attention to Ves. "On the surface, I see much of Gloriana's design style in the Bright Warrior design. Her technical mastery is admirable for someone of her age. Yet you are also credited as the lead designer of this particular design. What exactly do you bring to table?"

"Since you have read my record, you must have read up on my design philosophy, right?"

The Master nodded. "The record concerning your design philosophy is.. not very helpful. The Senior who received you during your pilgrimage to our sector headquarters has been remiss in cataloging your specialization. Since I am already here, I might as well correct this shortcoming. Please tell me more about these.. proto-gods."

Ves his hand all around the interior of the Avatar base. "Many of the mechs you see here are different from other mechs. I believe a mech designer as astute as you must have noticed what makes them stand out. Each of them exhibit one of my famous glows. These glows are generated by the life that I have created and infused in my mechs!"

"Go on." Willix smiled at Ves as if she completely bought into his story!

"Mechs are more than just machines." Ves spoke with true meaning. "They can be vessels of something great! To me, mechs are different from starships. The fact that high-ranking mech designers and mech pilots are able to warp reality by exhibiting all manner of extraordinary abilities means that it isn't too much of a stretch to believe that a lifeform exists which can wield these powers with much greater prowess!"

The intriguing notions that Ves put out successfully attracted the Master Mech Designer's attention.

"Even if that is the case, it is still a stretch to conclude these powerful beings are gods."

"This is why we merely call them proto-gods for now! According to both hexism and the Ylvainan Faith, life and death are two sides of the same coin. Life can persist beyond death, and the dead can rise back to life. There is even the possibility that life exists that has never stepped into the material realm! When I initially embarked on my career, I always felt that mechs are special beyond a reason. I slowly developed a theory that mechs aren't lifeless machines, but it was not only until I became exposed to the Ylvainan Faith that I had truly obtained the answers I sought for my entire life!"

"You.. became inspired by the local religion?"

"Yes!" Ves grinned like a street prophet! "I am extremely grateful to the Ylvainans for enlightening me with the truth of how reality works! The Great Prophet that is central to their faith has never truly died! He is still alive! As the Bright Martyr, I personally designed the Transcendent Messenger, Holy Soldier and Deliverer mechs to prove that



Prophet Ylvaine is still watching over his people from the realm of death! His divine presence still graces his believers every day through the mechs I designed with his blessing!"

"That is a rather unusual tale." Willix replied with a mildly shocked expression.

"I know, but the truth cannot be denied, ma'am! The proto-gods that I have come to make are truly gods in the making as far as I'm concerned! While they start off weak and powerless, they have the capacity to grow and come into power as the gods they deserve to be known! What I have witnessed and experienced on a planet called Aeon Corona VII has been another inspiration for me. The bestial gods that roamed this unique environment each demonstrated what my proto-gods might be capable of once they grow into their powers!"

"What does this have to do with mech design?" Master Willix frowned.

Ves spread his arms wide. "EVERYTHING! Don't you see, Master Willix? My mechs contain a component that is intrinsically unique to my designs! As a mech designer, I call this addition a 'divine component'. So far, I have not been able to discover any other mech designed by another colleague that contains this essential component. This means that my mechs are more complete than every other mech designed by every other mech designer! I believe that I am on the right path to revolutionize the entire mech industry! I will prove every skeptic and naysayer once I've reached Master and realized my design philosophy!"

His exuberance didn't seem to scare Master Willix at all. Instead, she crossed her arms and maintained a very keen interest in what he had to say!

This was not what Ves wanted to see! He wanted to evoke disgust! He wanted Master Willix to feel repelled by all of the superstitious nonsense he spewed from his mouth? Why did it seem as if Willix fully accepted his outlandish claims?

"You have developed a very peculiar theoretical framework. That is very bold of you." She praised. "The mech community normally isn't very tolerant towards exotic theories that rely on more.. esoteric assumptions. Class IX mech designers such as you often face intense difficulties in trying to gain acceptance."

"That is.. true. Professor Oodiv certainly didn't express much understanding towards my design philosophy. Only Gloriana has accepted my views! I am extremely grateful for finding a partner who is able to see mechs the same way as I do! We both believe that we can turn mechs into gods as long as we combine our powers! The mechs you see around here is nothing compared to the miracles we'll bring to life!"

"Ves is right!" Gloriana chirped as she helpfully played along with his act! "My boyfriend might sound strange, but I fully believe we are capable of designing mechs that are more than mechs. Gods exist. Not only that. Gods can be created! The key to making



this possible is to use the medium of mechs to anchor their existences and channel their godly powers into the material realm!"

"What is your ultimate aim? What are the two of you working towards?"

"Ves grinned even wider. "Why, we are aiming for nothing less than to mass produce gods in the form of mechs! We plan to make god pilots completely redundant! Our distinct brand of mechs will become known as the true god mechs in the mech community!"

The mere thought of trying to supplant god pilots with his distinctive mechs sounded crazy! God pilots were one of the most exalted existences in human civilization, yet Ves claimed he wanted to do nothing less but make them obsolete!

Any other mech designer or mech pilot would throttle his neck right now! Master Willix's entourage certainly looked as if they were tempted to do so! If not for their superior's presence, they would have taken action by now in order to punish Ves for his heretical remarks!

Yet.. the most powerful individual among the MTA delegation didn't share their reactions. Not a single shred of repulsion had ever shown on her face!

Instead, she looked more and more interested! Far from scaring her away, Ves just pulled her into his story further!

This was not part of the script!

*Chapter 1894 Mr. S*

Ves employed the same crazy-sounding arguments against Professor Oodiv of the MTA. He succeeded in arousing the Senior's disgust, and managed to end any further line of questioning in his unorthodox design philosophy.

He expected a rational mech designer like Master Willix to respond in a similar fashion.

After all, the MTA was known to be a highly secularist organization. Though it was officially neutral when it came to matters of faith, in practice most if not all of its members comprised of people who believed that every phenomena could be explained and that gods didn't exist!

Was Master Willix a closet believer or something? Ves didn't think so. She was a rational mech designer. Rationalists never engaged in superstition!

Right?

After Ves threw out his latest outlandish notion, Master Willix continued to remain silent as she mulled over his words.

The five men and women who accompanied her looked as if they had plenty of words to say to Ves, but none dared to act presumptuously in the presence of a Master!

The silence didn't last for long.

"Keep up the good work." She finally said.

"..Thanks?"

She smiled at Ves. "I am not Professor Oodiv, Mr. Larkinson. I come from the galactic heartland. I have dedicated myself to mechs for almost two centuries and experienced the diversity of mechs in dozens of star sectors. From third-class mechs to first-class mechs, I have witnessed almost every variety of mechs that can be made. I exchanged with thousands of mech designers from every corner of the galaxy and have become exposed to thousands of eclectic views with regards to mechs. Do you believe that your views are the most extreme I've heard? Far from it! Class IX design philosophies encompass an entire gamut of unbelievable premises!"

"I.. see." Ves stammered. "Does that mean you.. believe me, ma'am?"

"We are scientists. We are engineers. We are mech designers." She turned to her entourage and stared them down with a mildly-disapproving expression. "Look at the mechs around you. Have you noticed how some of those mechs exert a distinct influence on your moods and emotions? Whether Mr. Larkinson is right or wrong, there is no doubt that he has managed to produce results!"

"But, ma'am, his theories are completely unfounded!"

"Are they?" Master Willix pointed at a nearby Desolate Soldier. "Then how do you explain this mech?"

There was no way for them to answer this question. They had no grasp on the phenomena known as glows!

"Human society is divided. We are separated by differences in myths, beliefs, customs and more. Most of us believe that this is detrimental to our development as a species." She threw out. "The most common strain of thought is that we would have become strong enough to conquer the entire galaxy as long as we aren't so prone to division!"

"You.. disagree, ma'am?"

Master Willix nodded. "I think diversity is one of the greatest advantages our expensive society has produced. Certainly, there are both good and bad beliefs. All manner of

reprehensible despots have managed to take advantage of our propensity for division to further their selfish ends. Yet it is when humans have room to explore their own views that some of our most revolutionary innovations have come about. Trying to stifle these explorers when they aren't doing any harm does not further the interests of our Association."

She mostly directed her words at her fellow members of the MTA. Ves understood then that Master Willix was using his case as a teaching moment!

"Now, the theories espoused by Miss Wodin and Mr. Larkinson are certainly exotic. However, it is not the responsibility of the MTA to determine which views and design philosophies are allowed. So long as they do not cross any lines, it is our policy to leave them to develop on their own. If we did not adopt this policy, then narrow-minded people within our Association would have stifled numerous radical but successful advances in mech design."

Her rebuke hit the other officials of the MTA square in the heart!

"With regards to unusual theories and radical approaches towards mech design, our Association has maintained a consistent attitude towards them since our founding." She swept her gaze to the mechs piloted by the Avatars. "Proof is everything. No matter if their theories are inaccurate or incomplete, there is no doubt that this pair of mech designers have achieved unique results that have lent some credence to their views. It makes no sense to disparage them when they have succeeded in introducing something novel in the field of mech design. Each of you should understand how exceptional it is to achieve true innovation in the mech industry. In my opinion, these pair of youngsters are some of the worthiest mech designers I have met among the natives."

Her statement shocked both her entourage and Ves!

While Gloriana acted as if she deserved to be praised, Ves inwardly felt surprised that Master Willix was a lot more open-minded than he initially thought.

Was this what a true Master of the MTA was like? The breadth of vision Master Willix possessed was substantially higher than that of her fellow members!

After rebuking the others, she turned her attention back to Ves. "Your steadfastness and willingness to stand up to your beliefs are admirable. Ignore your detractors. As long as you continue to produce results, you can shut any naysayer. Remember, in the mech industry, right or wrong is determined by the mechs you design, not the arguments you use to frame your design philosophy. You can shut every argument up as long as you design or build the right mech."

"Thank you, Master. I appreciate your support."

Soon enough, they entered a structure that led them underground. Once the party arrived at the restricted hall that held the Quint and its four configurations, the MTA delegation began to take in the view.

It didn't take long for someone to state the obvious.

"This modular mech platform and its available configurations are all masterworks. There is no mistaking this judgement."

"This 'Quint' is stronger than we have led to believe! A mech this sublime is not the result of an accidental effort! The circumstances surrounding the creation of this masterpiece is suspicious. How can a pair of Journeymen create such a powerful masterwork?!"

From the remarks made by the MTA envoys, Ves discovered that they were quite experienced in evaluating masterworks! They managed to glean far more clues about the Quint than he expected!

As the envoys started to crawl all over the mechs, Master Willix swept her gaze towards the base platform and each configuration with piercing eyes.

Those weren't ordinary eyes! Ves guessed that Willix heavily augmented her eyes so that she could pierce through the inner structure of any mech!

After fifteen minutes of cursory examinations, the envoys floated back to Master Willix and whispered some of their initial conclusions. The Master nodded continuously as she agreed with their judgements.

She eventually waved her hand. "Continue inspecting the Masterwork."

Once her entourage returned to the Quint, Master Willix floated over to Ves and Gloriana and stared at them with a hint of disapproval!

Gloriana looked confused while Ves couldn't help but feel nervous despite his mask. It was too hard to hide his secrets in front of a Master!

"Did you really think you could fool a Master?"

Uh oh!

"What.. what are you talking about?" Ves cautiously asked.

"We have been nothing but truthful so far!" Gloriana earnestly claimed.

Master Willix frowned deeper. "It is time to stop avoiding the truth. Admit it. Lying to the MTA is deeply unbecoming of professionals such as you. I do not wish to see you ruin

your careers because you have decided to mislead us in order to earn more credit that you are not entitled to! Tell me! Did the two of you design the Bright Warrior by yourselves and fabricate this masterwork without any help?"

Both of the mech designers she addressed grew confused. What was she talking about?

As Ves wracked his mind on what Master Willix was referring to, he suddenly realized what she was talking about.

It was his decision to Superpublish his design! Prior to that, the quality and sophistication of the design was rather good but not exceptional according to their standards.

Yet when he Superpublished the design behind Gloriana's back, the Bright Warrior design fundamentally morphed into a different beast!

Seeing that this detail clearly hadn't escaped the sight of Master Willix, Ves decided to come clean.

"Yes." He spoke and pretended to be more upset about this admission than he really felt! "At the end of our design project, I.. took our finished design to another mech designer who subsequently tuned it up. Our benefactor considerably raised the quality of our mech design, which is good because my Larkinson Clan will benefit from piloting the best mech possible. It.. it wasn't our intention to misattribute our mech design to just ourselves, but in our defense, we never intended to publish the Bright Warrior. If not for turning its first copy into a masterwork, we would have never brought it to the attention of your Association!"

Master Willix softened her expression. "You are right, and I am pleased to hear you admit the truth. Can you tell me the name of your benefactor? From what I have deduced from the schematics of your design, the third party who improved your mech design is very skilled and possesses a great mastery in technical problem-solving. I'm quite interested in corresponding with such an eminent mech designer."

"Ves?" Gloriana looked to him in expectation.

He shrugged and generated a quick excuse. "My.. benefactor.. does not wish to be known. I know him as 'Mr. S'. He comes and goes when he pleases, and when he's gone it's as if he has disappeared from the material realm. To be absolutely honest, earlier in my career, I received a lot of guidance from him, but lately he has been showing up less and less in my life. I have found my own way."

"Understood." Master Willix nodded. "I will respect his privacy, then. I have encountered several cases like this. When skilled mech designers do not wish to be known, then it is

usually best to respect their privacy. Is Mr. S the primary cause for turning this mech into a masterwork?"

It sounded as if she had already made a conclusion in her mind! Ves instantly grasped this opportunity!

"Yes." He lied. "Gloriana and I would have never been able to create a masterwork mech on our own. It.. is true that we relied on external assistance to elevate the quality of the Quint. Mr. S deserves the majority of credit."

"This is not what the two of you have stated in your masterwork applications. Did you know how many red flags you've raised when the documentation and footage you've provided contains some very clear omissions?" Master Willix put her hands on her hips. "As I have already said, lying to the MTA is a severe offense. As mech designers, I expect better from you. Do. Not. Lie. To. The. MTA. Again. Understand?"

"Yes, Master."

Both Ves and Gloriana lowered their heads and pretended to be chastised by the Master's words!

"Now that we have established the truth, let us proceed with the verification process." Master Willix said and motioned them to step forward to the Quint. "Even if Mr. S deserves most of the credit for creating this powerful masterwork, the two of you appeared to have played a substantial role in its creation."

Once they approached the foot of the base platform, Ves and Gloriana meekly waited as the Master looked up at the tall machine with a hint of admiration.

"Alright. Step forward and touch the surface of this mech."

The pair did as the Master commanded.

While Ves felt the warmth within the mech, Master Willix stared at them both for almost an entire minute!

"Alright, you can withdraw your hands. I have seen enough."

Once he withdrew his arm, he looked towards the Master with a questioning expression. "Ma'am.. Are our masterwork applications.. still valid?"

If Master Willix found cause to reject their applications, then everything around Ves might fall apart! The Wodin Dynasty would certainly feel as if they had been fooled and would pull every support they initially promised!

"There are clear problems with your applications. This is undeniable." Master Willix spoke gravely. "However... earlier, I told you that you can rebut any argument as long as you design or build the right mech. Well, from what I have ascertained so far, the two of you possess a clear and undeniable bond with this mech. This is proof that you have materially contributed to the formation of this masterwork mech. As a consequence, the two of you are still eligible to receive your masterwork certificates."

Ves and Gloriana both looked relieved! They still had a chance!

### *Chapter 1895 Postponed*

What Ves feared the most was the MTA finding out the truth behind his design philosophy.

So when Master Willix initially found some problems, he was deeply afraid that she would force him to cough up his secrets!

Instead, she drew her attention to another loophole, thereby giving Ves a reprieve!

He would rather admit that Gloriana and him weren't solely responsible for making a masterwork mech than exposing something more sensitive!

Though they drew the Master's displeasure as a consequence, this was better than all of the horror stories Ves had fantasized about!

"Both of you have sworn an oath to uphold the principles and values of our profession." Master Willix lectured to the younger mech designers. "Being honest to yourself, others and the MTA is an essential trait for mech designers. Cheating and lying might be able to get you ahead for a time, but eventually lead to a dead end. Becoming a Master is far more difficult than you can possibly comprehend. While you have to explore this difficult journey on your own, know that you will make it ten times harder if you don't possess enough integrity."

While Ves nodded as if he took her lesson seriously, inwardly he felt only relief! So far, Master Willix didn't appear to be inclined to probe his design philosophy any further.

The conversation between them soon became more cordial. As Master continued to inspect the Quint by examining the base platform and the four configurations up close, she occasionally asked Ves or Gloriana to explain their design choices.

"Why did you opt to clad your mech with an alloy that is not natively produced in the Komodo Star Sector?"

"What is the reason for comprising the design of your rifleman mech configuration by making it compatible with both physical and energy rifles?"



"Is there a point to the swordsman mech configuration?"

Her questions were certainly sharp. Ves and Gloriana both exhibited clear difficulties in coming up with satisfactory answers!

Both of them only questioned their decisions more as Master Willix systematically exposed almost every fundamental shortcoming about the mech.

Even if the Bright Warrior was highly optimized and nearly perfect from a design aspect, Ves and Gloriana nonetheless could have made better decisions at many junctions!

As the examination proceeded to the testing phase where a mech pilot began to pilot the Bright Warrior and its different configurations, some discrepancies soon emerged.

The Illuminating Warrior's laser rifle inflicted considerably more damage than its technical specs suggested!

The Shining Warrior's spear delivered significantly greater force with its spear than should be possible!

The Nova Warrior's power reactor was a third more powerful for no apparent reason!

The Solar Warrior's sensors exhibited substantially more effective range without any augmentations to its systems!

At the end of the first day of testing, the entire MTA delegation was abuzz. There was no way to explain these abnormal performance readings! Even as Master Willix continued to examine the physical mech in person and scrutinized the design schematics from every direction, she began to frown as it failed to explain the discrepancies!

Ves looked helpless as the MTA continued to puzzle over his Quint as if they were performing a full certification process.

This wasn't part of the plan! The MTA delegation was only supposed to confirm that the Quint was a masterwork mech and that Ves and Gloriana deserved to be credited for its formation.

Master Willix personally confirmed that there weren't any further issues with regards to their masterwork applications.

This should have been the end of the story, yet the delegation clearly wasn't done with his mech!

While Ves expected the MTA envoys to be interested in studying the Quint, he never gave permission for them to station a pilot in its cockpit and bring the mech online! He



also didn't give them leave to test the capabilities of the four configurations by performing some basic tests.

The effects of Lucky's gems couldn't be hidden at this point!

When the differences between the Quint's actual performance and the theoretical performance of the Bright Warrior design were so wide, even Moira Willix became intrigued!

At the end of the day, after failing to come up with an explanation, the Master turned back to the pair.

She projected a bunch of performance charts that outlined the differences in the most obvious way possible.

"Please explain."

As usual, Gloriana pointed towards Ves. "He knows."

Ves awkwardly smiled. "I don't know the mechanics behind these inexplicable performance boosts either. The proto-god that I have instilled in the Bright Warrior design is quite capable, but it isn't capable of improving the raw performance of the Quint. I can only attribute these improvements to Mr. S."

"Understood."

Surprisingly, Master Willix didn't question him any further. Ves found out that attributing every discrepancy towards a mysterious superior mech designer was a very convenient excuse! It neatly fit the guesses that the Master Mech Designer doubtlessly made.

Of course, there was a possibility that Master Willix wasn't fooled, but Ves would take what he could get. Just like his final conversation with Master Olson, the best way to mislead Masters was to confirm their biases!

After the end of the first day of examinations, the MTA delegation exited the underground hall and returned to their parked starship.

They declined Ves and Gloriana's cursory offer to host them at their Austen Estate. Likely, they didn't want to spend the night in the equivalent of a peasant's hovel in their perspective.

"If I may ask, ma'am, how long will you stay?"

"Are you eager to see me leave?" Master Willix quirked her mouth in amusement.

Damn! Master Mech Designers were too astute! Between a Master and Calabast, Ves didn't know who was worse, but he would rather be rid of them entirely!

"We have.. plans." Ves answered. "Due to the Sand War, the Komodo War and other recent developments, we adopted a tight schedule. According to my original plans, I am supposed to undergo an implantation surgery soon."

Willix regarded him with a flat expression. "You would rather stick to your schedule than act as a responsible host? I am very very disappointed in you, Mr. Larkinson."

"My apologies, ma'am. I did not anticipate that you would continue to remain interested in our little masterwork. It is just a bridge mech. Its performance doesn't even fully reach the standard of a second-class mech!"

"You shouldn't beat your own creation down." The Master smiled. "As poor as its baseline may be compared to the multipurpose mechs that I am accustomed to working with, your Quint contains several interesting elements. Whether it is the improvements implemented by Mr. S or your 'proto-god', I have never encountered anything similar in my long career in mech design. When you reach my level, it is quite difficult to witness anything truly novel in mech design! Your Quint has successfully defied my expectations and presented me with innovations that are truly inspiring. Bravo. For a pair of young Journeymen like you, it isn't easy to impress me in this manner!"

Was Ves supposed to pat himself in the back? He would rather shove Master Willix through the hatch of her starship and see her depart as soon as possible!

He thought that Masters were supposed to be busy people whose time could never be wasted. At the very least, that was the impression he received from Master Olson.

So why was Master Willix so bored or idle to remain on Kesseling VII longer in order to study his masterwork mech? Was it truly that exceptional to the MTA?

Maybe sticking five different gems in a single mech was a mistake.

There was no arguing with a Master, however. Despite her politeness, Moira Willix carried herself with the demeanor of someone of supremely high station.

A pair of native Journeyman Mech Designers had no room for refusal!

"Please postpone your planned surgery." She instructed to Ves. "Whenever I encounter something novel, I am filled with questions. It would be helpful for you to be on hand as I thoroughly examine your creation over multiple days."

"No.. no problem, ma'am. How long will we be hosting your august presence?"

Willix tapped her finger against her lips. "A week will do. Please ensure that you and the Quint both remain accessible while I am here."

"We live to serve."

"Good." The old woman nodded in approval. "We won't occupy your time in vain. As long as you remain helpful and receive your masterwork certificates without any further issues, I will submit a request to award you with 1 million MTA merits, split evenly between each of you. With my standing, our sector headquarters will certainly approve of my request."

What?! 1 million merits! Ves completely turned his stance around as soon as he heard this figure!

"Truly, ma'am?"

"I thought we would earn less merits for our masterwork mechs." Gloriana couldn't help but remark. "Our mech is not a proper second-class mech, and we don't plan to submit it to your Association."

Master Willix smiled indulgently at Gloriana. "Those are the rules, but I am a Master. I possess considerable autonomy and authority within our organization. It just so happens that I like the two of you. Both of you are quite remarkable by yourselves, but together you make for a potent pair. I will be watching your careers closely from now on. If your Bright Warrior design is anything to go by, I am confident that you will be able to shake the mech industry as long as you mature."

While Gloriana beamed as if this was the happiest day of her life, Ves only felt his heart sink even further.

Attracting the MTA's attention was the last thing he wanted! He thought he could repel Master Willix by wearing his crazy hat, but how could he know that she was a lot more magnanimous and open-minded than he anticipated?

Clearly, Master Willix seemed to have adopted the attitude of a mentor towards them. Both Ves and Gloriana were promising mech designers who had the potential to provide the MTA and the mech community with a lot of unique innovations.

The Master didn't mind spending more time here to guide and question their work for this reason!

As Master Willix and her entourage finally disappeared into their ship, Ves and Gloriana slowly walked towards the shuttle that would bring them away.

Later that evening, both of them took stock of the meeting in the privacy of their shared bedroom.

As both of them had changed into their pajamas, they sat on the surface of the bed and looked towards each other.

"Master Willix is a lot nicer than I thought." Gloriana chirped. "I briefly encountered some Masters during my time at Centerpoint. Most of them are a lot more preoccupied and dismissive."

Ves shrugged. "Maybe that's the reason why she took it upon herself to travel to the Kesseling System."

His girlfriend winced. "She is certainly good at her job. Some of the questions she asked still haunt me to this moment."

"That's a Master Mech Designer for you. Their depth and breadth in mech design is unimaginably greater than ours. Hiding anything related to mech design from her is an impossible task!"

With seven days to go, Ves feared that Master Willix would keep asking questions. What she managed to uncover today was already bad enough. Multiplying it by seven would almost certainly spell doom!

That was the point, though. Moira Willix found something new and unique in the Quint. Ves feared that she wouldn't leave until she deciphered all of its working!

Ves looked bummed. Aside from the increasing risk of exposure, he also had to postpone his long-awaited implant surgery. He waited for months to integrate the Archimedes Rubal in his head. To delay it by at least a week annoyed him to no end!

"At least she's handing us a million merits for our efforts." Gloriana soothed him. "Doesn't that sound great? We are one percent closer to buying our beyonder ticket!"

"Whoopie." Ves replied flatly.

#### *Chapter 1896 The Benevolent Association*

How did he end up in this position?

Ves wondered why he had the 'fortune' to attract a floating disaster named Moira Willix.

This eminent dignitary from the powerful Mech Trade Association should have been throwing herself into cutting-edge research back at the hyper-advanced Halcyon Citadel.

In no way did Ves ever think that his works were interesting enough to garner the extended interest of a genuine Master Mech Designer from the MTA!

By her own words, she traveled through numerous star sectors and moved all the way from the galactic heartland to the edge of the galaxy. She experienced too many mech designs than Ves could count and exchanged with all sorts of unique and excellent mech designers.

And now, she decided to lodge at Kesseling VIII for the sole purpose to crawl all over his Quint like it was an ancient relic!

"What are you worried about, Ves?" A sleepy voice murmured from his chest.

He looked down at the long locks of hair that blocked his vision. Though he couldn't see the rest of her body in the morning light, he could feel the weight and warmth of his girlfriend's body pressing up against his side.

Ever since their first night of sleep, Gloriana grew comfortable with sleeping while cuddling with him. Essentially, his body replaced Clixie as her favorite stuffed animal, much to Clixie's consternation!

"Miaow."

The cat in question threw a jealous look at Ves from the foot of the bed.

"Meow."

Lucky licked the side of her head and distracted her attention.

"I'm afraid my spiritual component monopoly is under threat. The MTA is a band of thieves who somehow came into power. They don't need to steal other people's secrets covertly. They can just abuse their official mandate to extract every possible drop of value from so-called 'native' mech designers like you and me! Now that we have attracted the interest of one of their Masters, I fear the day will come where my glows become ubiquitous in the mech industry against my will!"

Gloriana yawned and raised her head to look at Ves in the eyes. "You're exaggerating. Master Willix may be an excellent mech designer, but your design philosophy is too unique. Do you truly think that she can do what you can do and create gods without your godly domain?"

"Ordinarily, I'm not concerned, but Master Willix is different. She's a rational mech designer. Have you seen how open-minded and tolerant she is of Class IX design philosophies like mine? That's because she's been trained to copy the essence of other people's design philosophies and use her combined knowledge to her own advantage in her work!"

"That's a very serious accusation, Ves."

"It's true!"

"I don't think it's that simple." She retorted. "Take my design philosophy, for example. Class I design philosophies can be just as difficult to adopt as Class IX design philosophies. It takes an extremely dedicated mindset towards the ideal of perfection to be able to imitate my specialization. Perhaps Master Willix is mentally flexible enough to approach my mindset, but I am absolutely certain that despite her formidable abilities, she can never fully comprehend my greatest methods! She doesn't have my drive!"

Her words reminded Ves of a contradiction.

If rational mech designers were geared towards absorbing the fruit of other mech designers, how could they possibly do so while remaining largely emotionless?

Passionate mech designers like Ves and Gloriana often stoked their passion and embraced the flames in order to produce their best works! The Bright Warrior design was almost entirely fueled by passion for example!

The notion that a rational mech designer was able to imitate the methods of a passionate mech designer was as absurd as a bot trying to create art!

Still, the fact that the MTA largely employed rational mech designers meant that they must have developed at least some tricks to cope with this contradiction!

While Ves did not think it was easy to copy his techniques, it was sheer folly to underestimate the design prowess of a Master!

Though Ves didn't know how many Masters resided at Halcyon Citadel, but he truly believed he wasn't wrong if he stated that Master Moira Willix was one of the best mech designers in the Komodo Star Sector!

Her presence alone threw the LMC, the Larkinson Clan, the local government and the entire Ylvaine Protectorate in disarray!

As the pair freshened up and met up in the dining room for breakfast, Gloriana tutted at Ves.

"I understand your concerns, but Master Willix is not here to threaten you and ruin your career. She's a mech designer from the MTA. She has an obligation to uphold all of the Association's ideals!"

"That doesn't really reassure me, Gloriana." He scoffed.

She didn't know the MTA like he did! There were darker sides to the MTA that were never voiced in public! All Gloriana knew about the Association was how it portrayed itself in public.

The protector and ultimate arbiter of human space might be dominated by males, but to Gloriana it truly stood up for mech pilots and mech designers regardless of their affiliations!

She glanced at him as if he was an idiot. "You are only focusing on the downsides of Master Willix's visit. I'm not saying that she doesn't damage our interests, but in my eyes she's a fair and principled mech designer. She not only promised to reward us with 1 million merits, she's also remarkably approachable and easy to talk to for a Master! Don't you realize what a golden opportunity she represents? We can learn so much from her as long as she remains charitable towards us! I don't know about you, but I shall definitely take advantage of her generosity!"

Her words had merit, Ves admitted. Master Willix truly appeared to embody some of the ideals of the MTA.

The Mech Trade Association may have become one of the most dominant organizations in human space, but at its heart it was still a trade association.

Though most people these days tended to forget about this modest-aspect, the MTA still had a responsibility to set an example on how anyone who worked with mechs should conduct themselves.

Ves was just being too cynical. He automatically assumed that the Masters in the Association only paid lip service to the MTA's ideals. Since they had reached the highest echelons of one of the Big Two, he thought that they would pretty much be able to take everything without giving anything in return!

Certainly, Master Willix clearly wanted to glean more insights from his Quint, so that aspect about the MTA was still true. He did not intend to drop his vigilance towards the thieving Master for this reason!

When the pair finished their breakfast, they boarded a shuttle and flew to the Avatar base where the MTA delegation had already started to resume their inspection of the Quint.

During the ride, Gloriana played with Clixie and Lucky while Ves quietly discussed with Gavin.

"It's bad, Ves." His assistant frowned. "The abrupt arrival of Master Willix has become public knowledge. The MTA has done nothing to hide her visit to our premises!"

"Figures." Ves scowled in disgust.

The MTA never took into account that he wished to keep the Quint under wraps for the time being! It just did what it wanted regardless of his desires!



"For now, the Quint hasn't become public knowledge, but I can guess it's only a matter of time before the Ylvainans and the rest of the star sector learn the reason why you attracted a bigshot from the MTA. We will have to move our announcement date forward if we still want to control the narrative!"

"Great."

"It's not all that bad, boss. We can take advantage of Master Willix's interest in your latest mech to increase your prestige. Her willingness to travel to Kesseling VIII shows that design ability has truly attracted the attention of the top! As long as we frame this observation in the right way, we can definitely improve your prestige! This will make you even more notable in the mech community!"

"While that sounds good, I don't want to paint a bigger target on my back!"

"On the contrary. Far from making you more vulnerable, you can turn this situation around so that you can implicitly suggest that you have earned Master Willix's support! Whether it's true or false, any enemy of yours will think twice about touching you, lest they earn the ire of a very highly-placed individual within the local branch of the MTA!"

That.. sounded quite good to Ves. He thought for a moment before he nodded. "Come up with a plan that allows me to do what you've suggested. Make sure you don't cross any lines, Benny."

"I know what to do." Gavin grinned.

With that taken care of, Ves discussed other matters until the shuttle finally arrived at its destination.

As Ves and Gloriana exited the shuttle, he turned to his cat. "Make yourself scarce. Master Willix may have overlooked you for now, but that might change at any moment!"

"Meow!"

"What do you mean? You have often been by yourself! Don't pretend you like to be around me all the time. If you want to enjoy some company, then head to Raymond who is holding on to the Larkinson Mandate for me. I'm sure the Golden Cat would love your company!"

"Meow meow!"

Lucky seemed to agree. He turned to Clixie and exchanged a few meows before the two entered the shuttle.

Gavin looked at the cats with bemusement. "Am I supposed to babysit your pets?"



A hand patted his shoulder. "Yup. Keep an eye on them and don't let them get up to any mischief."

The assistant looked helpless. He knew very well that he had no power over the pair of cats! Either of them could easily kick his butt if they wished!

Ves didn't care. He joined Gloriana in heading towards the underground hall.

Different from yesterday, the MTA delegation brought down a lot of equipment from their frigate.

Various advanced scanning equipment and other devices precisely gathered data from the base platform and all of the configurations!

As his own personal creation, Ves felt quite affronted by this deep and extensive examination!

However, there was no stopping the MTA. The only choice he could make was to bear with the situation and hope that Master Willix failed to glean any of his core secrets.

The pair strode forward until they reached a portable work console that was floating a few meters from the ground. Master Willix precisely manipulated the dizzying array of controls while sweeping her eyes past various projected screens.

"Ah, the two of you are finally here."

"Good morning, Master Willix." Both of them bowed and greeted politely.

"I have been mulling over the Bright Warrior design and the Quint since yesterday. There is quite a lot of depth in your work, and I have plenty of questions."

"We will do your best to satisfy your curiosity, ma'am." Gloriana dutifully said.

"Good."

The morning began with a quiz. Fortunately for Ves, Master Willix only focused on the technical aspects of their mech design. Gloriana easily took charge and answered most of the questions.

During this time, Master Willix often made brief but succinct remarks that often enlightened them to alternate solutions to the problems they encountered. They went outside the solutions selected by Mr. S, thereby granted them an even greater awareness of how the Bright Warrior design could be improved!

As much as Ves wanted to remain on guard, it was difficult not to get caught up by the mutual exchange.

His girlfriend was right. Master Willix was a font of knowledge and wisdom and didn't mind sharing some of it to the younger generation!

As the long day progressed, Gloriana gained a considerable amount of insights as most of the topics Master Willix brought up fell under her specialization.

Between the two of them, Ves possessed a much more esoteric specialty. It was considerably more difficult for Master Willix to guide him, so she directed most of her attention to the mech designer who had the most to gain from her insights.

It wasn't surprising therefore that Gloriana completely turned into Master Willix's attentive pupil! All of the younger mech designer's doubt and wariness towards the Master disappeared, and she completely adjusted her mindset to soak up as many gains as she could!

Meanwhile, Ves awkwardly stood at the side. While the two women appeared to be enjoying themselves, he felt kind left out. The topics they discussed went way over his head.

Was he supposed to feel glad or remorseful?

#### *Chapter 1897 Font of Wisdom and Knowledge*

Two days went by as Master Willix mainly directed her attention to the technical side of both Bright Warrior design and the Quint.

Ves noticed that she appeared to show a lot of interest in the improvements made by the mysterious Mr. S.

"Any Master or experienced Senior for that matter can implement these improvements in a Journeyman-level design." She revealed during one of her more talkative moments. "What is remarkable is that Mr. S managed to comprehensively elevate your Bright Warrior design while retaining your original design styles. Can you imagine improving a mech design without leaving some form of influence in the changed product? It's nearly impossible, yet the original version of your Bright Warrior and the improved version that Mr. S has produced are virtually similar in terms of character. This takes true skill."

The professional respect she conveyed towards Mr. S sounded genuine. It was as if Master Willix regarded his mysterious benefactor as a hidden Master!

Perhaps that was one of the reasons why she was being so amiable towards Ves and Gloriana. If they enjoyed the backing of a Master in hiding, then that signified that the pair must possess qualities that made them very promising!

This deduction combined with her own personal interest in their intriguing work prompted Master Willix to treat them more earnestly than she might otherwise choose.

Even though the Master talked to them all day she made sure that the examination of the Quint continued.

Her subordinates and helpers all inspected the Quint thoroughly. Sometimes, they even disassembled some of the parts to take a closer look inside!

This behavior alarmed Ves, but the MTA specialists treated the Quint with a lot of care. Their tools were highly advanced and their expertise was so great that they never threatened the integrity of the mech they were handling.

As expected of internal members of the MTA, all of them possessed genuine respect for mechs, especially masterwork mechs!

Their great ability actually shamed Ves to some extent. Though the MTA delegation only brought a modest amount of equipment, the skill and ability they demonstrated was far beyond Ves and Gloriana could currently demonstrate!

The gap between internal members of the MTA and natives was immense. Ves felt as if he was an ancient tribesman gawking at a bunch of technologically-advanced explorers who had come to examine every detail of his mudhouse.

It was difficult for Ves to suppress his tech envy and other kinds of envy. It would have been great if he managed to join the ranks of the greatest mech organization in the galaxy, but he knew it was not to be. He carried the taint of the Five Scrolls Compact, which just happened to be the archenemy of the MTA!

Therefore, spending time with the likes of Master Willix was just as precarious as a murderer hanging out with a police detective.

At any point in time, Master Willix might be able to sniff his association with the Compact or one of its Sacred Scrolls!

The worst part of this ordeal was that even if he knew the risks, he had no choice but to put up a mask and act as an eager Journeyman looking to pick up scraps from a generous Master.

A Master was worthy of genuine respect and admiration from lower-ranked mech designers. This was an iron-clad custom that almost everyone in the mech community followed!

Ves could not violate this norm without attracting a lot of attention. Therefore, he was forced to act within expectations and continue to stay close to Master Willix.

The act was grating on him, especially when it appeared that the Master actually didn't require that much answers from him. Most of the time, she turned to Gloriana for answers, making his presence largely redundant!

He could have undergone his implantation surgery by now. Integrating the Archimedes Rubal in his brain was a much more attractive prospect than listening in on the highly technical discussions between his girlfriend and the seemingly-benevolent Master.

It was not until the third that Master Willix finally paid more than a cursory amount of attention to the other lead designer of the Bright Warrior design.

"Mr. Larkinson." She began with a polite smile. "I've been refraining from delving into your principal contribution into your mech because your specialty isn't easy to grasp."

"My design philosophy is an earnest expression of my beliefs." Ves smoothly replied. "Creating gods is not for the meek."

"Yes.. gods. I am quite interested in them, or at least your views on them. Would you like to elaborate?"

Hell no! If Ves had his way, he would have sewed his mouth shut!

Of course, he wasn't stupid enough to express his inner feelings in front of Master Willix, so he instead adopted a helpful posture.

"What would you like to know, Master Willix?"

"Do you worship them? Are you in any way subservient to these gods you speak about?"

His intuition sensed a deeper meaning behind these words. From what he knew about the MTA's early history, Ves didn't have to think very hard to realize the trap in her words.

Fortunately, Ves never worshipped any gods to begin with. Whether it was Qilanxo, Nyxie, Cassandra or even his mother, he never believed they were unfathomable or deserving of his devotion!

Seriously!

Ves spoke the truth. "In the faith espoused by the Ylvainans, everyone has the potential to become a god. In my opinion, the separation between mortals and the divine is not as wide as everyone thinks. Gloriana and I agree that mech pilots and mech designers are already gods in the making. Starting from expert pilot or Journeyman Mech Designer, we advance up the ranks, each time gaining more and more divinity as we grow!"

"You are referring to psionic power." Master Willix spoke plainly. As a senior dignitary from the MTA, the rules that prohibited people from speaking openly about psionics didn't apply to her! "This is not a mysterious field. It is a measurable and empirically-established facet of nature that is only mysterious because it is difficult to explore."

"I don't disagree, ma'am." Ves shook his head. "In fact, it is because I agree with your assessment that I think that gods are not as omnipotent or omniscient as some faiths make them out to be. They can be great and powerful beings, but I am confident that I can master their existences one day and harness their powers in the form of mechs!"

Even Ves wasn't really sure what he was saying right now! He was just following his fake logic in convoluted directions in the hopes that Master Willix bought his act!

She nodded at him in an indulgent manner. "That is a good mindset to adopt. No matter what you choose to believe in, always remember that humans like us no longer need to serve any greater powers. Whether we're talking about powerful alien races or existences that are difficult to imagine, our race has still defeated an insurmountable amount of horrors and come to dominate half of the galaxy!"

"We're also making inroads in another galaxy." Ves conveniently diverted the topic. "I'm very excited about the invasion of the Red Ocean! Gloriana and I have made a promise to ourselves that we should embark on an expedition to the Red Ocean within a decade. Both of us think that we'll be able to take advantage of countless opportunities in the new dwarf galaxy!"

Master Willix looked surprised. "It is not impossible for you to travel to the Red Ocean by yourself. If you want to travel with Gloriana, then the amount of merits you will have to earn is considerably immense. Without involving additional partners, it should be impossible for a pair of Journeymen to accumulate the necessary merits."

"With respect, ma'am, we're not ordinary mech designers. It wasn't too long ago that Gloriana and I aimed to make a masterwork mech despite our relatively young ages. We didn't let anything stop us from achieving our goal!"

"You couldn't have succeeded without Mr. S." She factually pointed out.

Ves offered her a shrug. "That is correct, but no matter what, we achieved the result we wanted. Making our first masterwork mech is just the first step in our plan to obtain a second-class fleet beyonder ticket. Even if we are aiming, we have the confidence that we can succeed where others have failed!"

"He's right!" Gloriana nodded from the side. "Ves and I are special. When we combine our specialties and synergize our methods, we can design excellent mechs such as the Bright Warrior or produce outright miracles such as the Quint! Even if we had some help this time, I'm confident that the lessons we have learned today will allow us to replicate our success without any external assistance next time!"

"Those are some very bold words. I applaud your ambitions." Master Willix smiled. "There is no harm in aiming high as long as you are able to make some gains along the way. This way, even if you fail, you can still be proud of what you have managed to achieve."

This was the same advice that Ves once told other mech designers.

"Master Willix, do you have any advice on how we can improve our chances of becoming galactic pioneers before too much time has passed?" Ves boldly asked.

The earnest hope from both Ves and Gloriana caused Master Willix to shift her opinions of them. They were truly serious about aiming for the Red Ocean!

She shook her head as if she was facing a bunch of kids who wanted to play outside. "Well, my first advice is that you should highly consider finding reliable partners to share the burden. The Red Ocean is far more dangerous and chaotic than you can imagine. A pair of mech designers such as you might be excellent when it comes to making use of the abundant resources in the dwarf galaxy to earn money, but you need more than that to compete against the many groups that are seeking to do the same."

"We.. aren't eager to share power." Ves admitted.

"I suggest you correct your mindset. We mech designers excel in technology, but that is only one aspect about running a fleet or founding an enduring state. No matter what you seek to do in the Red Ocean, you will need a powerful partner who is adept in combat and command. It is also advisable to seek another partner that can cover your commercial, industrial and administrative needs. Don't think that any local will do. You will need the best. Only those who are good enough to lead their own organizations should be under your consideration. Everyone else is not worth your time."

The Master implicitly told Ves that it wasn't enough to rely on his existing enterprise to address all of the challenges he might face in the Red Ocean!

While Ves understood what she was getting at, he found it difficult to accept her advice.

There was hardly any partner he could trust aside from Gloriana!

"We will keep your advice in mind."

Since Master Willix seemed willing enough to talk about the Red Ocean, Ves tried to see if he could glean some insider details!

"If it's not too presumptuous to ask, could you describe what the Red Ocean is like?" He asked.

"The Red Ocean is.. a melting pot of dangers and opportunities." She spoke, her eyes glancing away as if she was recalling some memories. "If I was younger, then I would have felt tempted to push for an assignment in the dwarf galaxy. It is truly a place where dreams can be made and stars can rise."

"Why did you decline to do so, then?"

"It is also a furnace." She replied with a serious expression. "Our Association imposes heavy requirements to anyone who aims to exploit the Red Ocean for some very good reasons. It is not a place for the incompetent and the soft-hearted. While we have done some best to impose some rules and establish some order in our conquered territories, we cannot stop all the evils in our current galaxy and other galaxies. In our internal projections, we expect over ninety percent of galactic pioneers to fail!"

What! A ninety percent failure rate! That was astronomical!

#### *Chapter 1898 Duplicitous Smile*

"Did you think that my earlier advice is something you can disregard at will?" Moira Willix pinned Ves with a piercing stare. "If a pair of eager but naive mech designers such as you are in charge of a group entering the Red Ocean, then you will almost certainly fail in achieving your goals. There are dangers abound in the dwarf galaxy, both from the indigenous alien civilizations and your fellow galactic pioneers. We have not established any rules prohibiting fighting between pioneers because we know that this is a necessary process that can't be avoided."

Though Ves was already aware of the risks involved with any potential excursion to the Red Ocean, Master Willix knew more. Her words definitely had a considerable amount of weight behind them. If she said the Red Ocean was filled with peril, then he should not discount her words!

"I see." He said while maintaining a determined expression. "Even if the risks are high, we are still committed to our plan. We would regret it for the rest of our lives if we missed out on this great adventure."

Gloriana nodded, though she looked a little less eager to take part in the scramble for phasewater and other resources.

Master Willix sighed when she saw that it was unlikely for her to sway them from changing their minds.

"The Red Ocean has been in our sights for a very long time." She told them. "Our invasion is a carefully planned operation. While we have devoted a lot of attention on how to defeat the advanced indigenous alien civilizations that inhabit this dwarf galaxy, we have not made any extensive plans on how to govern and exploit our conquered territories. This matter is left to pioneers. No matter how they compete against each other, by the end we hope to turn the dwarf galaxy into a strong and productive addition to the territories under the control of our race. We will need this strength for the times to come."

This was something that Ves had already figured out. What surprised him a bit was the last sentence. Master Willix seemed to hint that there was a greater reason behind humanity's initiative to conquer the Red Ocean!



"Aside from the advice you have already given us, is there any other suggestion you can make to improve our chances of success?"

The Master glanced at Ves with a thoughtful expression. "All of the advice and warnings that you can find on the galactic net ought to be sufficient. As long as you don't underestimate the pitfalls and dangers of the Red Ocean, you should be able to survive. Greed poses the greatest threat to your success. Know your strength and don't compete for resources or territory that you can't keep. Remember that most galactic pioneers will emerge from the galactic heartland and galactic center. Their strength in terms of wealth, technology, manpower and resources is significantly beyond your comprehension."

"How can we narrow this gap, ma'am?"

"If you have managed to redeem a beyonder ticket, then you should be capable and resourceful enough to find a way." She replied. "Know your advantages and make use of them. In my opinion, your only advantages are your unique and distinctive mech design abilities. You should leverage them in a way that will allow you to make allies, business partners and eager customers among the powerful forces from the more prosperous parts of the galaxy. Don't compete with them. Cooperate with them. This is also why I suggest you partner up with someone powerful enough to act as your diplomat and business partner."

That was a decent approach. Ves seriously considered adopting it because it sounded like a safe and stable way to survive in the Red Ocean.

He didn't harbor any ambitions to found a state and neither did he hunger for wealth or phasewater.

To him, what mattered the most was finding to enrich and to progress his design philosophy! Becoming a Master was his goal, and he believed he would reach this height a lot faster in an environment like the Red Ocean!

"Enough about this matter." The Master shook her head. "This discussion is wholly premature. Wait until you have redeemed a beyonder ticket before inquiring further. It is not so easy for a pair of young mech designers such as you to earn 100 million merits in a short amount of time. Don't expect that you'll be able to earn another million merits easily by relying on something as volatile as producing masterwork mechs. Our Association deliberately set those high redemption thresholds in order to slow down the influx from the galactic heartland and the galactic center. We expect a much lower proportion of people from the galactic rim to be able to pass this test."

This sounded discouraging, but not so much. Ves didn't consider himself inferior to second-class and first-class mech designers. At most, their design styles and expertise branched in different directions.



Whatever advantages they possessed, Ves could obtain them as well! In fact, after designing the Bright Warrior, he pretty much understood the essence of second-class mech design! It wouldn't take much further study for him to start designing a higher class of mechs!

The rest of the day went back on track as Master Willix returned to examining the Quint.

In the next couple of days, the MTA delegation temporarily took possession of the Quint and a couple of Bright Warriors supplied to the Avatars. They stuck their own mech pilots in their cockpits and deployed in the field on both land and in space!

Any hopes of hiding the Quint were completely dashed once Master Willix insisted on observing its performance out in high orbit where anyone on Kesseling VIII with a store-bought telescope could observe the masterwork mech in clear detail!

Ves could only smile and nod at the MTA's increasingly more intrusive requests. In their perspective, natives like him served to provide the Association with useful data and research directions!

Everytime he thought about saying no, he reminded himself that he and his girlfriend each became 500,000 merits richer.

This was a vast sum of merits, and Ves didn't even have to give up his masterwork mech permanently!

Any other mech designer in his position would be more than eager to cater to the MTA's needs.

Gloriana certainly acted like this! Though she helpfully obfuscated his secrets by explaining her views in the lens of hexism, she showed remarkably little restraint in explaining every little detail about the Bright Warrior design!

On his part, Ves had to periodically fend off Master Willix's probes in his design philosophy while remaining polite.

Just because he managed to divert her attention from the inner workings of his design philosophy didn't mean she forgot about her intentions.

The Master possessed a presence that was both academic and tyrannical. Though she maintained a gentle facade, underneath the surface was a hungry and avaricious beast who hungered for any knowledge that could supplement her formidable mech design repertoire!

In one of the latter days of her stay, Master Willix surprised Ves when she projected a peculiar mech design in front of his face.

It was a very simple but very elegant mech design. Though it only depicted a plain rifleman mech, Ves couldn't help but get lost in the many subtle nuances contained in the schematics.

"This!" Gloriana widened her eyes as she became increasingly more fascinated by the mech design! "This mech design approaches perfection! I can't possibly think of a way to improve it any further, which is rare!"

"What!?"

Ves pulled back a bit and viewed the mech design in a more holistic manner.

To his shock, he discovered that the simple landbound rifleman mech design contained many touches that reminded him of Gloriana's work! It not only imitated her design style and distinctive quirks, but also a portion of her extraordinary applications!

This basically meant that Master Willix had managed a considerable portion of Gloriana's design methods!

As Ves studied the mech design deeper, he noticed some discrepancies, however. If he looked closely, the mech seemed to possess a slightly different concept of the perfect vessel.

This was a gap that Master Willix hadn't been able to overcome!

In the end, his girlfriend's design philosophy belonged to herself. Only one mech designer in existence was completely suited for it, and that was Gloriana herself!

That did not take much away from Master Willix's accomplishment. She managed to imitate the easier aspects of Gloriana's design style and design philosophy with perfect accuracy and mastery, thereby demonstrating a very scary capability to assimilate other people's strengths!

He briefly glanced towards Gloriana to see how she took this surprise.

Only a brilliant smile adorned her face as she stared at the mech design with genuine hunger and admiration!

"This mech design.. can.. can I have it, ma'am? This work is so elegant. Each part is like a masterpiece, and the way you put it together is so fine that I can learn lots of lessons from your solutions!"

Moiri Willix shook her head and drew the projection back. "That is a very poor idea, Miss Wodin. I'm afraid my work will only harm your development. There are aspects about this mech design that can potentially be incorporated in your future direction. I do

not wish to contaminate you with the design direction that I have chosen for this casual design. You should make your own choices on how to develop your design style."

"I.. understand." Gloriana sobered up a bit. Though she still yearned to study the rifleman mech design, she exhibited a considerable amount of restraint! "I've gained enough from what I saw. I shouldn't study it any further."

While his girlfriend expressly turned around so that she no longer faced the projection, Master Willix spoke again.

"Mr. Larkinson, my work is not just an attempt to reproduce your partner's design philosophy. I have also attempted to capture the essence of your design philosophy, with much poorer results. Can you tell me what my attempt is lacking?"

What? The mech design was an attempt to copy his design philosophy? His inner alarm instantly rose as Ves studied the mech design from another angle!

Now that he thought about it, some of the design choices did seem as if they bore his style rather than his girlfriend's style.

However, that only pertained to the technical aspects of the mech design. As for the spiritual aspects... Ves hesitated on what he should reveal.

He didn't want Master Willix to steal his design philosophy. He already hated it when she barged in and studied his Quint from top to bottom! There was no way that he would ever agree to proactively instruct her on how to copy his unique abilities!

Fortunately.. her attempt at imitating his specialty was absolutely abysmal. If she didn't point out that the mech design was supposed to contain his strengths, he wouldn't have suspected that he had anything to do with the work!

"It's dead." He replied flatly. "There is no life in this mech design. Gods are alive. How can a mech become a god when it doesn't possess any life to begin with? Unless you believe that mechs are alive and have the capacity to embody or outright turn into gods, there is no way you can approach my design philosophy, ma'am."

The Master paused for a moment before closing her eyes. "As expected from a Class IX design philosophy. If I am unable to accept the starting premise of a design philosophy as unusual as yours, I will not be able to accomplish anything. What a pity."

"Perhaps you will have a better chance if you convert to hexism or the Ylvainan Faith." Ves unhelpfully suggested with a duplicitous smile. "I took a lot of inspiration from their beliefs in forming my approach towards mech design. As long as you adopt their views on life, death and gods, you will have taken one step closer to designing mechs that contain life!"

"I shall take your suggestion under consideration." Willix stoically replied.

### *Chapter 1899 Mind Over Hear*

In the final days of the examination period, Master Willix seemed to focus less on the Quint.

Instead, she devoted an increasing amount of time on designing mechs that contained life!

The speed at which she designed astounded him. Though she put up an opaque energy screen around her to prevent contaminating Ves and Gloriana with her methodology, the fact that she could present a complete mech within thirty minutes absolutely shocked them both!

Her mastery of technical mech design had reached a very great height. What took months for Ves to design could easily be put together by someone who was much more senior in their profession.

This was what it meant to be a Master! The distance between her current state and the legendary mech touch was quite close!

Of course, as much as Master Willix tried, she never even got her foot in the door when it came to designing mechs with life!

Though her energy screen blocked most if not all forms of probing in a similar fashion to his Privacy Shield, Ves could still peek at her from a spiritual lens.

It was difficult to observe her in a passive manner. She was like a sun in his vision. Her formidable spirituality was so powerful yet so contained that it was very difficult to see what was actually going on inside her mind.

Nonetheless, Ves observed enough to guess that even though Master Willix concentrated fully on designing her mech, she lacked the most essential ingredient to convey her mechs with even an inkling of spiritual foundation.

She lacked the life domain!

Her spirituality exhibited a lot of light and heavy attributes, both of which interacted with each other in a delicate balance. This made sense as Master Willix originally specialized in gravitic systems according to her public record.

Whatever methods rational mech designers used to imitate other people's design philosophies, they could copy the theory and knowledge, but they weren't quite capable of copying other people's spiritual attributes!

Yet if that were so, why was she capable of copying Gloriana's specialization to such an accurate degree?

After a bit of thought and a lot of surreptitious observation, Ves formed a possible theory.

Rational mech designers did not really utilize their spirituality in the same way as other mech designers. Their spirits had become very tame and contained, thereby allowing their rationality to take primacy in any attempts to design a mech.

The value that spirituality brought to their work therefore had to be substituted by something else.

What else could rational mech designers substitute this quality than their greatest strength, their rationality?

Ves began to suspect that each time Master Willix designed a mech, she kept her passion and most of her spirituality under lock and key while she let her mind work overtime in forming some sort of mental construct that served as a 'fake' design seed of some sorts!

It was actually quite similar to how Ves created masks and infused them with spirituality!

The advantages of this method were myriad. If Master Willix was truly capable of reconstructing the design seeds of other mech designers, then wouldn't she be capable of substituting their work to a reasonable degree? Even if the fake possessed a couple of shortcomings compared to the real deal, Master Willix wasn't limited to channeling just a single fake!

She could probably channel half-a-dozen fake design seeds and leverage the strengths of each of them at the same time!

If she chose the right design philosophies to imitate, then she might even be able to achieve synergies despite working as a solo mech designer!

Ves couldn't help but feel profoundly shocked at the limitless potential of such a mode of mech design!

No wonder rational mech designers were considered superior!

No wonder rational mech designers dominated the MTA!

No wonder the MTA developed such a voracious hunger for the innovations of other mech designers!

For a moment, Ves felt incredibly inferior. As he worked hard to deepen his design philosophy and tread new paths, Master Willix could just take advantage of his hard efforts to and effortlessly copy most of his hard-earned innovations as long as she possessed the right understanding!

Yet... it appeared it wasn't so easy to copy other people's understanding of mechs. Class IX design philosophies were especially known to be odd and unorthodox.

Ves had a suspicion that one of the primary reasons why Class IX were valued rather poorly within the mech community was because rational mech designers couldn't make good use of them! The difficulty of imitating an odd design philosophy like his own was ten or even a hundred times harder than Gloriana's design philosophy!

The much-vaunted rationality of mech designers like Master Willix worked against her in this case. The more rational she became, the less capable she was of violating basic truths.

For example, suppose a madman mech designer existed who was capable of designing reality-defying mechs. The premise of his design philosophy rested on the assumption that  $1 + 1 = 3$ .

It was plausible for someone who didn't possess a right mind would be able to believe in such an absurd statement.

Yet it was impossible for a rational mech designer who clearly knew that  $1 + 1 = 2$  to delude herself into thinking otherwise!

The starting point of his design philosophy was that mechs were alive. Mechs were capable of possessing the quality known as life. Mechs needed to be treated with the same amount of respect as living beings.

This was not merely a case of regarding mechs as a vessel of life. Ves went beyond that and truly indoctrinated himself into believing that even if they were composed of a lot of metal parts, they still possessed the potential to be alive!

Since the start of his design career, Ves had always lived and breathed through this principle. He regarded it as his core ethos and never violated it like his other principles!

How could a passerby, even someone as mighty and superior as Master Willix, possibly embody all of his efforts within a matter of days?

He felt more relieved after making this realization. He lost his concerns and began to regard her feeble attempts at copying his design philosophy as an amusing pastime.

His life domain contained more than just his beliefs that mechs were alive! It also contained his heartfelt admiration and wonder for life.

If even a Master Mech Designer failed to imitate his design philosophy, then Ves had nothing to fear from others breaking his spiritual component monopoly!

Naturally, there was also a downside to this development. Ves would find it exceptionally difficult to pass on his teachings to someone else. As a prerequisite, they needed to have the right aptitude to develop a domain that encompassed both life and mechs!

That was a concern for later, though. For now, Ves was more than pleased to see a mighty Master fumble so embarrassingly in trying to imitate his design seed.

Naturally, Master Willix didn't hit her head against a wall all the time. She regularly consulted Ves on how to design his style of mechs.

She even instructed him to design a basic mech on the spot!

"Please design a mech in front of me in three hours."

"I can't design a mech that fast, ma'am."

"The quality of your work doesn't matter. In your record, you designed several competition mechs under high pressure. It shouldn't be a problem for you to develop a mech design."

Ves shrugged and did as he was instructed. He didn't dare to play any funny games this time and earnestly concentrated his mind to design a very rough and unoptimized knight mech.

He designed the mech according to a very plain and boring vision. He simply imagined the knight mech as an immovable rock. He wanted it to function as a mobile obstacle that could root itself in place in order to withstand a huge amount of incoming fire.

Ves declined to borrow the strength of Qilanxo or another design spirit to enhance the spiritual character of his design. He was afraid that Master Willix would be able to capture this interaction!

Instead, he fell back to his older methods and simply created an image of an immovable rock in his mind before infusing it with a generous dose of spiritual energy.

This turned the spiritual image into a remarkably substantial existence despite its lack of complexity!

Ves hoped that its apparent strength would be enough to fool Master Willix into thinking that the empowered image was not that much different from one of his design spirits!



He created and empowered the image on the fly as he was designing the mech. This little bit of multitasking was well within his capabilities.

At the end of the three-hour design period, he infused the mech design with his simple image, thereby bestowing it with both structure and life.

Despite the inconsequential nature of the rudimentary knight mech, Ves was truly proud at what he was able to do in just three hours of time. This mech was far more sound and coherent than anything he could design under the same conditions in the past!

The mech actually worked. It was a viable design that could truly be used for the purpose that Ves meant for it to fulfill. Not only that, but it possessed a simple but very noticeable X-Factor that accentuated its use. Any mech pilot who hopped into the cockpit would doubtlessly become influenced by the image of the immovable rock!

Despite holding back his more important techniques, Ves truly exerted his utmost. His pride as a mech designer prevented him from purposefully doing a bad job under the observation of a Master in his profession.

Whether Master Willix was able to glean any secrets from his operation, Ves didn't care. He had become firmer in the belief that Master Willix lacked multiple essential qualities that allowed her to manipulate her spirituality in the same fashion as his own!

If the Master wasn't putting on an act, then she truly failed to comprehend how to replicate his methods.

In the next couple of hours, she continually reproduced the knight mech he designed down to the finest detail.

From a technical standpoint, her attempts were completely accurate down to the nanometer!

Yet during this entire time, her spirituality remained still while her mind created different mental constructs.

These were similar to his images, but were completely hollow because they lacked spirituality that could infuse them with life and turn them into autonomous existences!

When she somehow managed to apply her mental constructs to her imitated designs, the effect wasn't very noticeable.

That was because hollow mental constructs contained no substance! They added nothing to a mech design because they were just figments of Willix's imagination!

Naturally, this didn't mean that Master Willix might be able to find the right knack and succeed in the future, but Ves believed she lacked too much to be able to equal or surpass his design philosophy.

Rational mech designers may be capable imitators, but they were never able to match the sheer capacity for innovation like passionate mech designers!

Ves may only be truly good in one aspect of mech design, but he was the only one who was capable of delving new ground!

The same went for Gloriana. Master Willix made a fine attempt at copying her design philosophy, but she relied on her mind instead of her heart!

There was always a gap between theoretical understanding and absolute belief.

The former was a house of cards while the latter was a solid mansion!

No matter what went wrong, Ves would always possess the belief that he was right! The same went for Gloriana!

This kind of persistence was a trait intrinsic to passionate mech designers. It was essential to their ability to innovate!

Ves tried hard not to look smug or gloating. He maintained a humble and respectful posture and regularly provided her with useless advice.

At the end of the seven-day period, Master Willix finally stopped her attempts and wrapped up the examination of the Quint.

The MTA delegation was finally ready to depart!

#### *Chapter 1900 Raising the Standard*

The examination of the Quint officially ended.

Of course, the raiders from the MTA did much more than ascertain whether the Quint was a masterwork mech and that Ves and Gloriana deserved credit for its creation.

Under the lead of Master Willix, the MTA delegation systematically studied every single part. Not even the gems escaped their scanners!

Fortunately, Lucky's gems truly didn't emanate any unusual emissions. By all accounts, they were useless pieces of decoration that served no purpose other than to make the mech a little prettier.

Among the millions of different components and subcomponents, they attracted no attention at all! Even Master Willix completely disregarded them in favor of more important parts!

As the advanced equipment and tools all lifted in the air and exited the underground hall by themselves, the MTA envoys began to depart without another word.

Only Master Willix and her bodyguards lingered for a moment. After continually failing to replicate Ves' design philosophy, she did not look discouraged in the slightest.

Instead, she smiled and looked up at the Quint in admiration. She looked completely at ease, which was out of his expectation.

As Ves and Gloriana stood quietly a few steps back, they waited for the Master to issue her final words.

"Each masterwork mech is a treasure." The old woman finally spoke. "The value of a masterwork is indescribable. While I'm not able to reveal why they are so great, don't treat them lightly. Just because you were able to make one at your young ages doesn't mean you can create them on command. Relying on external help is a crooked way to become a masterwork mech designer. While it is true that your affinity for mechs have increased, you only deserve partial credit for this accomplishment."

"We are aware, ma'am." Gloriana modestly bowed her head. "We will do our best to be able to develop the capability of building masterwork mechs on our own. My design philosophy and our ambitions hinge on them! The Quint will not be the last time we make a masterwork mech!"

Over the week, Gloriana had become increasingly more comfortable in Master Willix's presence. The two got along quite well.

"The two of you are still too far from that point." The Master shook her head. "Journeyman aren't supposed to make masterwork mechs. The fact that you belong to the rare group that has breached this rule doesn't mean that you are better than your peers. Unlike you, many other Journeymen are diligently deepening their practice and developing new methods. The most solid and talented among them may be able to overtake you in the future when they embark on their road to Master. Your prior experiences and accumulation all affect your chances of bridging the impossible gap that stands between Senior and Master."

She sounded very serious about this. She was essentially warning them not to be blinded by the glory and glamour of making masterwork mechs. Becoming a Master Mech Designer was much more important than increasing their ability to create masterwork mechs!

"We are always dedicated to progressing our design philosophy, ma'am." He affirmed.  
"We are still committed to designing mechs the regular way."

"Good. I hope to see you reach Senior before your first century. As for reaching the rank of Master, even I can't calculate your chances of success. You will have to rely largely on yourselves to realize your design philosophies. No matter how much the two of you support each other, don't forget that you will need to be able to design Master-level mechs on your own if you want to reach my rank!"

This was another pertinent warning. Lately, Ves and Gloriana collaborated pretty much nonstop. They hardly wanted to return to the days when they designed their mechs alone.

Both of them had come to depend on each other. Ves wasn't very passionate about technical mech design while Gloriana lacked the capability to engage in spiritual mech design. By allowing the other to cover their weaknesses, they formed a win-win arrangement where their mech designs only contained the best of both!

Yet as great as that sounded, the pair risked distorting their practice. By constantly failing to address their shortcomings, they lacked the practice and experience to cover for their weaknesses when they went back to designing mechs by themselves!

Both Ves and Gloriana were smart enough to realize this hidden danger. They both nodded in acknowledgement at Master Willix's simple but sage advice.

The Master proceeded to provide them with further advice. The pair received tailored hints and suggestions that would doubtlessly make their advancement trajectory smoother.

This was the benefit of receiving guidance of an older and more advanced mech designer! The value of a Master Mech Designer was far more than their personal design capabilities.

What was just as valuable about them was their ability to elevate other mech designers around them! Just like how expert pilots perpetuated the strength of the original Larkinson Family, Ves hoped to serve as the same kind of pillar for his Larkinson Clan!

Master Willix eventually said goodbye to the Quint and hovered towards the exit. Her bodyguards silently kept up with her while surrounding her from all sides.

While Ves and Gloriana matched her pace, they patiently listened as the Master sporadically made some general remarks.

"There are several reasons why I awarded your partnership with 1 million merits." She noted as she appeared outdoors. "Part of it is what you deserve for bringing glory to the Komodo Star Sector's mech industry. While it is a rather minor accomplishment at the

galaxy level, creating a masterwork mech at your ages is still a feat worthy of recognition in the Yeina Star Cluster. Not even the Winged Serenade Star Sector can boast of a Journeyman who can beat your record!"

"We are happy to raise the standard of our local mech community, Master. Even if we're just a frontier star sector, our mechs aren't any worse than those designed in other star sectors!"

"I agree." She nodded. "Though most beg to differ. I hope you can maintain your current attitudes towards mech design, because your competitors from Winged Serenade and other developed star sectors are able to create works that are much more exotic than what you are accustomed to competing with! Never lose confidence and never forget that no matter where you are, you will always represent your star sector in the galactic stage."

Though Ves dutifully nodded at her words, inwardly he wanted to roll his eyes. Now that his Larkinson Clan transitioned into an independent entity, he was pretty much done with the Komodo Star Sector.

He couldn't wait to leave this poor and rotten star sector behind!

Whether it was the sandmen, Friday Coalition or Hexadric Hegemony, Ves was eager to distance himself as far away as possible from them! There was no possible advantage in continuing to remain within their reach!

Additionally, the looming arrival of the mysterious envoy from the Ruined Temple also weighed heavily on Ves. While he planned to leave the Milky Way Galaxy within the decade, there was no harm in securing a head-start!

When the group finally arrived at the parked MTA frigate, Master Willix turned to face the younger mech designers with a stern expression.

"There is another reason why I took the initiative to increase your merit award." She spoke. "As the youngest masterwork mech designers in our star cluster, your value has increased considerably. If you lack confidence in your current abilities to protect yourselves, then I highly suggest you spend those merits on solutions that increase your security. There are many possible options to choose from, but know that the most effective ones demand a considerable amount of merits."

Both Ves and Gloriana shared a look with each other. Neither of them exhibited any willingness to waste their merits!

While Ves was aware that many essential goods and services offered by the Rim Guardians and the MTA required merits, he didn't want to delay the start of his grand expedition!

If Master Willix caught their unspoken intentions, she didn't take note of it. As a representative of the MTA, she stood above the petty squabbles and conflicts that took place in ordinary space.

She was not allowed to grant the pair any overt favors in order to maintain her Association's neutrality!

"Do you have any suggestions on how to earn more merits, ma'am?" Ves boldly asked.

Master Willix pursed her lips. "According to your record, you have recently become an associate of the Rim Guardians. That is already the best step you can take. I am unable and unwilling to help you on this matter. As far as I am concerned, earning the merits required to redeem a beyonder ticket is a critical qualification test. If you are unable to obtain a beyonder ticket within a reasonable timeframe, then that shows that you are not competent enough to do well in the Red Ocean. Only if you overcome this difficult challenge will you be able to obtain a chance to be part of the ten percent of pioneers who succeed in their endeavors in the dwarf galaxy."

That sounded like a bummer to Ves, because so far Master Willix had been quite generous in other ways!

Even as she stole some of their valuable methods and insights, she made sure to repay the favor!

"Will we be seeing you again?" Gloriana suddenly asked.

It was as if she didn't have enough of Master Willix's guidance!

The older woman shook her head. "That is unlikely. While I have enjoyed studying your work, I have other projects to attend to. There should be no further intersections of our lives, so this should be the last time we meet each other in the flesh."

After that, the pair formally bid farewell to Master Willix as she finished her final say. The final envoy from the MTA floated to the open hatch of the frigate.

Once she entered, Ves and Gloriana hastily distanced themselves from the ship as she began to hum and come online. With the grace of a bird, the starship easily ascended from the ground before blasting off towards orbit!

"Well.." Ves spoke after a few minutes. "That's that. We finally got rid of the Master."

Gloriana frowned. "Master Willix isn't as bad as you make it sound. She's been nothing but helpful throughout our stay. She mentored us for an entire week! Do you know how many mech designers would kill to attract so much attention from a Master?"

"While I admit her tutelage was helpful, don't forget that she took advantage of us as well! With how extensively the MTA delegation crawled over our Quint, they probably understand our masterwork mech better than us! Master Willix openly copied your design philosophy! Aren't you upset that she stole all of your earnest efforts?"

Gloriana blinked and smiled. "Not at all. I take it as a compliment, actually! It's flattering to see that Master Willix can work with my design philosophy. As an innovator, you should always maintain confidence in your ability. No matter how much others try to imitate your works, they'll never be able to surpass the original!"

Though Ves somewhat agreed with her statement, he wasn't entirely sure if Master Willix would find a way to crack the code some day!

She might have failed so far, but just a few days had gone by. What Ves feared the most was that she wouldn't give up and continually to experiment until she finally achieved success!

Still, if the MTA truly managed to break his spiritual component monopoly, then Ves would just have to work with this new development.

As the only pioneer in this field, Ves would always possess an edge over the imitators and copycats! He could even benefit from the MTA's proliferation of spiritual components to expand his reach and make his products more mainstream!

Though this outcome didn't sound so bad, Ves actually didn't want to see this outcome.

He was much more selfish than that! He wanted to keep all of the gains from his spiritual component monopoly to himself!