

Mech 1961

Chapter 1961 Lack of Progress

After Ves and Gloriana moved to the Scarlet Rose, they were eager to commence their new project.

The next day, they moved down to the mech workshop compartment which had undergone a lot of changes.

Aside from blocking off Compartment G-13, the compartment also featured an expanded design lab with several more amenities that were useful in the mech design process.

Their two design teams awaited the arrival of the lead designers with deference. As soon as Ves and Gloriana entered the workshop, their subordinate mech designers bowed!

"Welcome back, Mr. Larkinson!"

Ves smiled and gestured them upwards. "Rise. You don't need to perform these kinds of rituals for me. As long as you perform your duties earnestly, that's all I ask of you. As mech designers, it's our work that proves our sincerity."

Once his subordinates rose, Ves observed them very carefully.

A month had passed since he last interacted with them. A lot had happened during this period, and Ves was curious whether his mech designers were still as eager to work for the LMC as before.

He already got a read of the Tovar mech designers. Because he hadn't told them whether they were allowed to remain in the company, the Tovars looked eager but nervous.

Unless they were very good actors, Miles Tovar and the rest actually looked afraid of getting dismissed!

Though Ves wasn't sure whether he should trust his judgement, the sight nonetheless pleased him. He became a bit more inclined to retain them. While they weren't the best subordinates he could obtain these days, he was very satisfied with their foundation and work ethic.

He directed his attention to the second design team.

As expected, all four Ylvainan mech designers decided to stay. Oscar, Renee, Erica and Pascal were all sincere believers in the Bright Martyr!

However, considering how extensively the True Ylvaine Dynasty infiltrated his ranks, Ves wasn't sure of their loyalties.

"Are any of you True Believers?"

"No." Oscar DiMartin answered. "None of us worship the Living Prophet. We... don't think he represents the founder of our faith."

The other three Ylvainans shook their heads as well.

"Are you telling the truth?"

"We would never lie to the Bright Martyr!"

Ves could buy that. With his near-deified status among the Ylvainans, they shouldn't be able to lie in his face!

After asking a few more questions to the Ylvainans, he turned his attention to the last two oddballs.

Mayer Torto and Merrill O'Brian no longer stood out from the Ylvainans anymore. They used to regard Ves as a very good but very human mech designer.

Now, their expressions were hardly different from that of the worshipful Ylvainans!

"I'm sorry for all of the dangers you've endured." He said.

Merrill smiled. "You don't have to apologise, sir. I've experienced worse in.. my old job."

"It's a given that the Friday Coalition wants to target the two of you after you received your Masterwork certificates." Mayer added his own voice.

The Sentinel mech designer was honest, at least. Mayer mainly stuck around because he wanted to work under bona fide masterwork mech designers!

Ves appreciated his frank reasoning. It allowed him to tailor his expectations to Mayer and avoid any unfortunate misunderstandings with regards to his willingness to remain under his employ.

Overall, he was pretty happy with his design teams. While he wouldn't shed a tear if any of them decided to quit, he would certainly miss their contributions!

"Before we announce our latest mech design project, I would like to talk to each of you in private."

As Gloriana kept everyone occupied, Ves invited the mech designers to a private office one by one. He wanted to hear how they were faring and what they thought of recent events.

He started with Miles Tovar. The Apprentice Mech Designer fidgeted in his seat once they entered the office.

Seeing him so tormented by uncertainty prompted Ves to soften his expression.

"Let me be honest." He began. "I still haven't decided whether I should retain you and your fellow Tovars."

"I'm aware that our political situation isn't very convenient." Miles meekly responded.

The disparity in status between them had grown significantly. Ves was not just an ordinary Journeyman anymore. Despite his age, he achieved something that evoked envy in almost every professional in the mech industry!

"The good news is that I don't really care about the opinion of the Bright Republic these days. I'm concerned what the government will do to your Tovar Family, though. I don't want to be the cause of the downfall of another family of our state!"

Miles offered a reassuring smile to Ves. "There is absolutely no need for concern. My fellow Tovars and I are already exiled from the family."

"That didn't stop the Friday Coalition from coming after my unconnected relatives in the Bright Republic."

"To be honest, Mr. Larkinson, that won't happen. Our Tovar Family is too intertwined with the institutions of the Bright Republic. Unlike your Larkinson Family, our removal will instantly throw the Bright Republic into chaos. The CRC can hardly provoke another mass uprising like the one that rose up in the Ylvaine Protectorate. The Fridaymen have already attracted a lot of alarm due to their recent actions. They can hardly afford to provoke more trouble for fear of getting admonished by the MTA."

Ves didn't fully comprehend how the Tovar Family would be able to avoid getting Larkinsoned. Still, Miles sounded so confident in his family that Ves might be engaging in needless worry.

"If that is what you claim, then I don't have many more objections to keeping you in my employ. Just remember that as long as you are on the LMC payroll, your primary loyalty belongs to me and my mech company. The Tovar Family's interests come afterwards, especially now that you're exiled. Have I made myself clear?"

"Crystal, sir. While I can't promise you that I will always be comfortable with that, I will make sure to bring any potential issues to your attention before they turn serious."

"That sounds good. I would rather prefer you to be honest to me up front. Do you know what I hate the most?"

"No?"

Ves leaned forward and displayed an ominous grin. "The people I hate the most are traitors. It's unfortunate that I didn't have the chance to take care of the last person who betrayed me. He took his own life before my guards could restrain him. If not for that, I would have probably turned him into my test subject!"

Though Miles was obviously confused why a mech designer of all people required a test subject, he was astute enough to refrain from asking further.

After Ves made it clear how generously he intended to treat traitors, he lightened up and directed his attention to Miles' professional development.

"I haven't been able to tutor you and instruct you as much as I wanted to in recent times." He said. "That said, you should have still been able to manage your development on your own. How much progress have you made?"

"I study every day." He said. "While I don't have Miss Wodin's high-quality augmentations, my learning ability is well above average, or I wouldn't have graduated from the DCTI with my grades. While I'm not as fast as some, I'm very happy with how much I've been able to improve. I've even started to tackle some of the unlocked Clarion University books you've added to the library. While much of their material is too advanced to me, I'm a lot more confident in my foundation these days. My colleagues are just as happy."

Ves nodded in satisfaction. "That's good. Graduation doesn't mean your learning comes to an end. You are still close to the bottom of the mech industry totem pole. In order to make something of yourself in this business, you need to advance to Journeyman, and to do so you absolutely have to develop a certain level of mastery over the skills required to design a mech."

"I have done that, Mr. Larkinson. While I'm happy with how much knowledge I've gained, I'm still uncertain whether I have come closer to advancing to Journeyman. I could use your advice."

Instead of answering immediately, Ves quickly studied Miles with his spiritual vision. While Miles was the only Tovar mech designer who possessed spiritual potential, it didn't seem to have developed since the last time he checked it out. This signified that Miles hadn't fully developed or committed to a design philosophy.

"Take it from me, Miles. Learning alone is not enough to elevate you to my rank. Even if your knowledge is rather lacking, you can still utilize what little you know to design a decent mech. The key is to develop your own style and figure out what exactly you wish

to specialize in. Developing a design philosophy is not merely about picking your favorite flavor. You need to flesh out the reasons why you want to design a certain style of mechs."

"I did that, sir! For almost ten years, I dedicated myself to designing aerial mechs! I even narrowed the scope of my design philosophy even further upon the advice of a mentor, but I still haven't made any progress!"

Ves could sympathize with Miles. Despite his rich family background, mech designers mostly had to rely on themselves to become a Journeyman.

It was impossible for someone incompetent to become a Journeyman! If he was wrong, he would let Gloriana dress him up!

"From my own understanding of the promotion process, Apprentices like you need to develop a strong conviction for your design philosophies. It's not just about knowing that your design philosophy has promise. You need to believe in it. You need to believe in your ambition."

Miles frowned. "I don't entirely understand."

"It's simple." Ves lifted his hand and tapped his temple. "It's not just about your head."

He tapped his chest. "It's also about your heart. You need to devote yourself to your design philosophy as if it's your girlfriend. Love your design philosophy. Date your design philosophy. Marry your design philosophy. Sometimes, thinking too much is detrimental to this process. You need to offload some of the processes from your mind to your heart. It doesn't matter if your design philosophy sounds daunting or that it is almost inconceivable to realize it. As long as you believe in your design philosophy, you will be in the best state to break through your current bottleneck."

Though his advice sounded earnest, Miles still began to frown.

"Respectfully, Mr. Larkinson, that.. sounds awfully close to religion. You are essentially asking me to treat my design philosophy as superstition."

Ves blinked.

"I.. can see how you can develop such a misunderstanding. It's not as bad as it sounds. There is much more to mech design than is apparent on the surface. Part of the reason why high-ranking mech designers are so revered in the mech community is because their design work transcends what is strictly possible in reality. As long as you open your mind to the possibilities, I think you'll find it easier to find your heart in mech design. Do you know Ketis?"

"I'm familiar with her." Miles nodded. "I occasionally get in touch with her in order to talk shop."

"I guided her along this method. While I didn't explain my theory to her so straightforwardly, I believe she can become a promising Journeyman Mech Designer in time. Both of you are Apprentices, but I'm much more optimistic about her chances than yours. Unlike you, Ketis genuinely possesses a heart for swordsman mechs. Unless you can develop a similar degree of obsession for aerial mechs, I'm not sure you'll be able to remain ahead despite your age."

Ketis was almost a decade younger than Miles. By all rights, Miles should be able to advance to Journeyman sooner than the former pirate designer, but right now Ves was not very optimistic!

Chapter 1962 The Meaning of Creation

After talking to each of his subordinate mech designers, Ves gained a good sense of their individual progress. He also sounded out their willingness to remain a part of his team even if Ves attracted trouble!

He underestimated their resolve. Most of the mech designers he hired weren't set up for success.

The Tovar mech designers had money, power and connections, but failed to translate these advantages effectively.

The Ylvainan mech designers mostly consisted of a mixed bunch. They were incredibly devoted to their faith, but couldn't channel that into their work.

Mayer was very bright, but he was so calm that his passion levels were muted.

Merill possessed the most interacting background and experiences of all. Despite her many ordeals with pirates, she appeared to be a bona fide rational mech designer!

The last two mech designers gave Ves a bit of a headache in terms of their future development.

The truth was that Ves did not like rational mech designers. Though Master Olson was rather decent, after encountering people like Patricia and Master Willix, he completely detested these kinds of mech designers!

Rational mech designers treated passion and emotions as liabilities rather than assets. Though they needed at least a little bit of passion and emotion in order to maintain their motivation in their profession, they treated them as if they were dangerous exobeasts that had to be stuffed in the deepest, darkest cage in their minds!

Ves thought that was unnatural. Everything about rational mech designers came across as artificial. He much preferred to work with the likes of Gloriana who was fully invested in her design philosophy to the point she was always honest when it came to her specialty!

At work, Ves never needed to think too much or doubt Gloriana's honesty. Both of them possessed different views towards mech designers, but because they knew each other's preferences so well, they often managed to achieve synergies in their collaboration works!

With rational mech designers, Ves wasn't sure he'd be able to accomplish the same degree of synergy.

While they were very adaptable, there was something very slimy and disingenuous about them. By emulating other specialties with their minds, they pushed their primary specializations to the side!

Regardless, Ves was stuck with Mayer and Merrill.

Though he supposed he could give them the boot, that was too petty for him. It wasn't Mayer's fault that he was inclined towards rationality. He was still young and Ves had plenty of time to corrupt,— ahem, guide him to the right path!

As for Merrill, she was too useful to the LMC due to her abundant amount of practical experience. With his current level of fame and prestige in the mech industry, Ves could easily hire scores of talented subordinates as long as they didn't mind some excitement in their lives.

However, it was a lot harder to find someone who was smart, decent and versatile as Merrill. Ves liked her a lot and considered her just as promising as Ketis.

After sorting out his impressions, Ves realized that all of them had stagnated in their growth.

While they were benefiting a lot from his expansive library, there was more to designing mechs than expanding their knowledge.

Ves knew first-hand that while piling up on various skills increased a mech designer's options, it did not automatically result in better mech designs!

"I haven't guided my subordinates sufficiently." He admitted to himself. "I only focused on their immediate concerns rather than their greater needs."

"Meow."

Lucky floated alongside his head before landing on the Larkinson Mandate floating on his other side!

"Thank you for your help, Goldie. I'm pretty sure of my judgement, but it helps to have a second opinion."

Nyaaaa.

As a spiritual entity, the Golden Cat possessed a natural advantage in reading the true intentions of people, especially if they hadn't been trained to guard against this kind of observation.

His hand reached out to pet Lucky while a spiritual projection tickled Goldie's chin.

"Meow."

Nyaaaa.

Once he had his fill of cats, Ves rose up and left the office. He entered the design lab and faced his design teams while nodding at Gloriana.

He clapped. "Alright. I'm glad I talked with all of you on an individual basis. It has become apparent that all of you share a common shortcoming."

Everyone paid careful attention to him. They were all curious what Ves thought they lacked. Even Gloriana sat up straighter from her seat!

"I already told Miles why he isn't able to progress his design philosophy." He revealed. "What do you think a mech designer represents? What do we actually do for a living?"

"We design mechs." Merrill plainly answered.

"That's correct, but what does that actually entail?"

"We.. utilize our science and engineering skills to develop large war machines."

"That's better, but not quite enough. Are we scientists? Are we engineers?"

Most of the mech designers except Gloriana nodded as if this was true.

"WRONG!" Ves slammed the surface of the closest workstation! "While it is true that we can perform the same functions as scientists and engineers, that is not the extent of our jobs! Have you forgotten the artistic side of mech design?"

"Mech designers have to apply their knowledge in a creative and ingenious manner in order to achieve success." Mayer noted.

"Good! Those are the words I've been waiting to hear! Creativity and ingenuity are both vital traits to mech designers. I suspect the main reason why none of you managed to progress too much is because you are focusing too much on one side of mech design at the cost of the other on the other side of your profession!"

The realization stunned them! Even though they were aware of the duality of mech design, they hadn't focused too much on the creative side of their profession!

Ves didn't blame them. It was very hard to develop one's creativity and ingenuity. To most people, they were born with these traits. There wasn't really a solid way to measure their strengths, and that made it difficult to come up with methods to improve them. They were too vague!

Normally, mech designers passively exercised their creativity and ingenuity by designing mechs. The more aspects of a mech they contributed to, the greater the stress on their ability to innovate!

While this solution worked decently for independent mech designers such as Ves and Gloriana, it was different for dependent mech designers who worked in a design team.

Dependent mech designers were only responsible for a portion of a mech design. Usually, their contributions were limited in scope and trivial in importance.

In a design team, the lead designers made all of the most important design decisions. This allowed Ves and Gloriana to exercise their creativity and ingenuity to the maximum.

Their assistants didn't share this luxury. They had to make do with the mech design profession's equivalent of janitorial work and perform all of the menial jobs to ease the efforts of the more important mech designers!

This was the most standard model of a design team. Ves had no desire to change it because he truly needed the help to increase his productivity.

However, he was not blind to its exploitative nature. If the assistant mech designers continued to perform odd jobs, they might eventually lose the ability to design a mech by themselves!

This was not what Ves wanted to see. Since his mech designers each pledged their loyalties to him, it was his duty as a league to reciprocate their trust!

"Even though there are times when our projects need all hands on deck, you still have plenty of time to spend on your progression. Rather than continue to hit the books, I'd like to see you spend your time on more fruitful pursuits."

"Such as?"

"Most of you chose to increase your competences by expanding your knowledge base, but starting from today, I want to see you devote your time on applying your gains by designing your own mechs."

His subordinates reacted with surprise.

"Are we allowed to design our own mechs?"

"You are. I'm not the kind of boss who disapproves of your efforts. Just make sure you do your design work after you have completed your tasks for the day. As long as they are decent enough, we can discuss later whether we adapt your work and prep it for the market."

"You'll actually allow us to sell our own mechs through the LMC, sir?" Oscar asked with shock.

"Yes! That said, if the mech isn't too good, I'll probably sell it under a different brand. I've already extended the same offer to Ketis."

He explained some of his conditions. All of them understood the opportunity that Ves provided.

Not every employer was willing to publish the designs of assistant mech designers!

Even if their own work didn't measure up against their bosses, the option to design a mech for the market was incredibly valuable to their development!

Ves visibly saw his approval rating rise among his design teams. The Ylvainans looked at him with even more devotion than before, while the Tovars all felt vindicated by their choice to stick to their current jobs!

He smiled. "While I would like you to have fun, don't forget what mech design is truly about. It's not only your head that matters, but also your heart. One of the keys to progressing your design philosophies is to fall in love with it, for a lack of a better description. If you are just going through the motions, then you can forget about advancing any further than Apprentice Mech Designer."

Not everyone was as confident in advancing as others. Most of his assistants ranged from 25 to 40 years old. Plenty of them were older than thirty, which meant they possessed a decent amount of work experience.

It was easy to dream big when they were studying mech design at school. Yet once they entered the job market, the reality for mech designers turned out to be a lot more cutthroat than they thought!

"It's not enough to be a good learner!" Ves emphasized. "Technically, we can call ourselves engineers. However, I think it's a mistake to adopt this mentality. Mech design is more than just an engineering profession. Mech design is art. Mech design is about pushing your own vision. Mech design is about proving the entire mech industry wrong by turning the impossible into the possible! That is what a mech designer truly means to me! If you aren't committed to your design philosophy, you're just an engineer!"

His lecture made a significant impact on his subordinates. Though Ves presented a rather binary argument that wasn't fully accurate, he did so in order to drive a point!

He needed to shake the complacent mindsets of his subordinates and encourage them to see their profession in a different light!

Mayer raised his arm. "I have a question, sir."

"Ask."

"I think I understand what you are trying to tell us, but how exactly do you develop a heart for mech design?"

Ves looked at him as if he was an idiot. "Find your passion. Follow what you like the most about mechs. Perhaps it might be useful to think back on how you regarded mechs in your youth. That child-like wonder and fascination of mechs that drove you to study mech design is not something you should put aside now that you have realized your ambition to become a mech designer. Ask yourselves these questions. Why do you love mechs? What do you want to add mechs? How hard are you willing to work to realize your ambitions?"

Every subordinate mech designer looked thoughtful.

In contrast, Gloriana smiled and nodded throughout his lecture. She agreed with all of his points!

"My boyfriend is teaching you a very valuable lesson." She added. "We both encountered plenty of mech designers who are similar to you. They think that designing mechs is all about crunching numbers or drawing the most optimal mech schematic possible. That's not really mech design. The only way to become a true mech designer is to find the meaning of creation and apply it your mechs!"

Chapter 1963 Virtual Library

Ves felt a lot better after he lectured his subordinate mech designers.

He imparted some very important insights to them. To their credit, none of them dismissed his advice.

It would not be easy to develop and exercise their creativity and ingenuity. It would be even harder to develop their 'heart' for mech design!

Spiritual potential or not, Ves believed that every mech designer benefited if they approached their work with the mindset of an innovator rather than a problem solver!

A mech designer and an engineer possessed the same tools. Yet to Ves, the former distinguished himself from the latter by focusing on creation.

To create a new product, a mech designer possessed an unlimited amount of options. Each mech designer developed a unique pattern of design choices which formed their design style.

This was the mech designer's way of making sense out of the limitless possibilities.

Those who failed to develop a design style or commit to a design philosophy risked getting lost in this vast and endless forest.

In mech design, obtaining more choices wasn't always better.

This was what his subordinates were doing by spending all of their free time on studying textbooks.

This was what Ves had done in the past when he prioritized earning DP in order to exchange for valuable skills.

Yet all of that distracted from the fun side of mech design. How many kids had dreamt of designing their own mechs? How many of them were able to turn this childhood dream into a reality?

Ves observed something very interesting about mech designers. As the dreamers grew older, they became more mature. They became more focused on 'grown-up' concerns such as making a living or pleasing their bosses.

It was easy for them to set aside their silly childhood wonder and fascination.

Yet to someone like Ves, this pure and innocent adoration towards mech was one of the strongest sources of strength for passionate mech designers like himself!

To him, successful mech designers didn't necessarily have to think all the time! It was fine if they turned off their brains! As long as their hearts were strong enough to cover for their minds, they all had the potential to create novel new mech designs that broke existing boundaries!

Ves took a brief break after lecturing his subordinates. As Gloriana began to unveil their new design project, he began to reflect on his own lesson.

Even though Ves was the one who came up with these insights, he felt as if he gained a deeper understanding of his own teachings!

He was always confident about his heart for mech design. He considered it a strength derived from himself rather than the System.

While the assistance he derived from the System granted him the luxury of exploring this aspect of mech design, it was something that he could continue to improve without depending on others.

Though Ves was aware that his views on mech designers wasn't the only interpretation available. He was sure that there were plenty of other schools of thought who vehemently disagreed with his emphasis on the heart of a mech designer!

"Rational mech designers are probably disgusted with my views." He muttered under his breath.

When Ves finished his self-reflection, his girlfriend had just finished her own presentation.

"...Don't forget the central premise of this project. Our primary goal is to design a spaceborn striker mech that is able to deter incoming enemies through intimidation. It is a mech designed for massed battles and intense engagement. It also has to be commercially viable, so we need to pay close attention to our budget. Any questions?"

"What kind of glow will you put in this mech design?" Mayer asked.

"Ves?"

He answered the question.

"You've met me in my Pride of Dusk outfit a few times. The glow of our upcoming mech will largely resemble the glow from my Pride of Dusk. I'll bring it to the design lab next time so you can familiarize yourself with the glow and so you can acquire the right mood to design this specific mech. Any other questions?"

"Is this a niche product or a mass market product?"

"That's a very important question. Right now, I'm not sure yet." Ves admitted. He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin in thought. "I'm inclined towards both directions. While I would like to make my product universally appealing, it is very hard to accomplish such a level of success. The Desolate Soldier succeeded because there was a very desperate need for this kind of product. Different from then, the various crises and wars in the Komodo Star Sector did not result in a surge in demand for striker mechs. There isn't an obvious hole for striker mechs either, though I believe the value proposition of our upcoming

design is enough to generate its own demand! We just have to make sure our product is reasonably well-rounded."

There were two general strategies towards mech design. They could try to make their product as well-rounded as possible while still retaining its distinctive strengths.

Ves adopted this approach to varying degrees to most of his commercial mechs. He needed to accommodate a very wide diversity of customers. While it was impossible to please everybody, he still sought to enhance the sales potential of his products as much as possible by increasing their applicability.

In contrast, a mech designer could also take the opposite approach and forget about checking as many boxes as possible.

Instead of focusing on elevating as many performance parameters as possible, Ves had also designed mechs where he focused on a couple of critical parameters and tried to raise them as much as possible!

Extreme mech designs such as the Aurora Titan and the Deliverer which focused mostly on a single aspect to the detriment of everything else were not very good sellers. Though the Deliverer came paired with fantastic special features, there was no question the mech was a niche product!

Though Ves had a lot of fun in designing these weird mechs, he recognized the importance of keeping his market instincts sharp.

He still needed to earn a lot of money!

While his recent circumstances allowed him to pursue other priorities, he hadn't forgotten about his enormous wish list of goodies he wanted to procure! Obtaining a fully-fledged second-class factory ship was just the start!

Right now, Ves recognized he was in an enviable position compared to other mech designers.

After receiving his masterwork certificate, a lot of industry insiders started to pay more attention to him. While it was hard to notice all of the regard he received due to spending all of his time on a ship, he knew his presence would probably ignite a storm among the local mech community if he landed on any occupied planet!

With all of this publicity in fame, Ves did not have to work too hard to market his next product. As long as it was noteworthy enough, the free publicity would likely be considerable!

Naturally, he also needed to publish his mech design before the mech community forgot about his recent accomplishment. That was why he set a deadline of four months for this project despite how little time it afforded for optimization!

Everyone soon began to work. Ves and Gloriana tasked all of their subordinates to browse the MTA's component library and select the most fitting publicly-available parts to licence.

Ves sat down behind a terminal and performed his own search.

This time, he didn't log into the MTA's virtual portal the normal way.

Instead, he pressed his finger on a port, thereby forming a hardline connection between the terminal and the implant in his mind!

His entire senses changed.

In one moment, Ves was sitting in the design lab of the Scarlet Rose.

In the next moment, he entered a vast and ancient library that was filled with an enormous amount of traditional hardcover books!

While his sense of smell and taste weren't working right, his sense of sight and sense of hearing had fully immersed themselves in this virtual illusion!

"Interesting." He smiled.

In this endless library of wooden shelves and wooden interior, thousands of mech designers quietly browsed its contents through various means, and those were just the people within the vicinity!

Some of them looked up the location of a physical book and walked all the way in order to pull it out of the shelf.

Others just sat down at one of the many traditional wooden desks and summoned the book by manipulating a projected interface.

Most mech designers didn't bother this charade at all. They eschewed the archaic tradition of reading actual books in favor of reading their contents directly through the projected interface!

After studying the other mech designers, he felt the latter two groups were missing out on the ritual the MTA presented.

Why did the MTA set up their virtual portal in this fashion? Were they trying to go back to the past? Were they encouraging mech designers to waste valuable time by looking up a specific book among the seemingly-endless shelves?

Ves didn't think those arguments were true.

He developed several interpretations on the meaning of this ritual.

The one he was the most sure of was that the MTA tried to make its knowledge a bit more troublesome to reach in order to drive an important point.

Knowledge wasn't free. Knowledge didn't come from nowhere. Knowledge needed to be valued.

As Ves determined the location of a specific catalog of component licenses from a nearby interface, he began to walk through the long and broad halls flanked by rows and rows of impressively-tall bookcases.

Occasionally, Ves encountered a crossroads, and sometimes he turned left or right.

He encountered plenty of mech designers along the way. These mech designers occasionally approached random colleagues and started up a spontaneous exchange.

The interior design library fostered a sense of knowledge sharing. Everyone who entered the library in this manner wanted to learn something new. This put the visiting mech designers in a generous mood.

In some cases, their moods encourage them to share some of the knowledge and insights that they ordinarily kept close to their chests!

Due to the unique virtual setting of the library, the mech designers had the option to pull their conversation partners into a private communication channel.

Even though they stood in the middle of a hall, to outsiders no sound escaped from their mouths. Their faces turned fuzzy as if they were swept up by static in order to prevent any bystanders from reading their facial expressions.

Of course, there were also those who didn't bother with hiding what they shared.

"Light mechs are worse than heavy mechs!" An old man shouted to a younger woman. "Your statement is factually wrong! Larger is better! Heavy mechs are so loaded with features that they always have a solution for every problem! As for light mechs, their capacity is so small that I can't even fit a pocket knife in their puny frames!"

The young woman smirked at the old codge. "I have one word for you. Mobility."

"So what?! Do you think all heavy mechs are slow to move?! As long as you strap a powerful enough engine or flight system to a heavy mech, they can move just as fast as their lighter counterparts!"

"What's the point of a heavy mech if three-fourths of its available capacity is occupied by a supersized mech engine or flight system? That's a huge waste of exotic materials to me! Mobility is the one area which always redeems light mechs and dooms heavy mechs!"

"Preposterous!"

As Ves walked past the quarreling mech designers, he shook his head. Their argument sounded completely silly to him. There were advantages and disadvantages to both weight classes!

Of course, there was no way to sink this conclusion in their thick skulls. Ves didn't have to study their records to realize that they were specialists in light mechs and heavy mechs respectfully.

When mech designers believed their design philosophy was right, no one would be able to convince them that they were wrong!

Fortunately, the audio of their conversation automatically cut off once Ves took a few more steps.

He smirked. "What a nefarious library."

He suddenly realized the true goal of the virtual library. The MTA just wanted to foster as many exchanges as possible. As long as these conversations took place in this setting, the Association would be able to record all of their valuable insights!

Chapter 1964 Oriental Fashion

Ves 'sat' down at one of the half-walled wooden 'desks' with a book in his 'hand'.

It was interesting to perceive a virtual setting through this fashion. The partial digitization of his mind allowed him to perceive virtual environments with much more fidelity than he thought!

It wasn't perfect, though.

Although the MTA did an excellent job, the virtual immersion still lacked some very subtle details that he couldn't quite describe.

At some points, Ves had an uncanny feeling that he was trapped in a false setting.

This kind of discomfort didn't go away. He always found at least one reason to feel disturbed.

It spoiled the novelty of his first virtual immersion experience. Ves wasn't sure whether he wanted to enter the virtual library through this method again. It was a lot more straightforward to browse the portal through a traditional projection.

He looked down and opened the book. He flipped through the pages and ignored his slightly-off sense of touch.

Since the flamethrower was critical to his striker mech, Ves decided to start his search by looking through various models of flame-spewing projectors.

In general, the fundamental mechanisms of flamethrowers weren't complicated. Each and every flamethrower model that Ves encountered in the book shared the same delivery methods.

The ingenuity in them came from how the weapon designers tried their best to make their weapons as robust and controlled as possible.

Flamethrowers had to contain a lot of potentially-volatile substances. Their ability to contain the propellant and oxidizing agent, the amount of heat they were able to bear and how well they prevented the heat from leaking to the mech all distinguished one model from another model.

Certain flamethrower models specialized in channeling the fiery output as far as possible. Others attempted to widen the flames so that the striker mech could block every approach from the front in an instant!

All of these aspects and more provided Ves with an endless amount of choice.

After browsing a few dozen different models, he gained a very good sense on what he could choose from. Aside from the weirder flamethrowers that tried to achieve something exceptional, Ves still had a lot to choose from. Many of them delivered identical performances, so he was free to choose according to his preferences.

He eventually settled on a flamethrower configured for more close-ranged action.

By default, the 34F Enison Spreader featured a wide but short-ranged delivery method that was quite good at occupying a broad front with burning substances!

While the flamethrower could be set to narrow its cone of flames, it wasn't as good as increasing the range. More specialized flamethrowers were able to reach double or triple the range, but in exchange they made a lot of punishing tradeoffs.

Ves couldn't get everything. Considering the main purpose of his striker mech as a defensive mech, he figured that range wasn't an exceptionally high priority to the mech.

His striker mech didn't necessarily have to defeat a mech in order to fulfill its purpose. As long as the enemy stopped advancing forward, that was already enough to justify its addition to a mech roster.

The large but fairly dispersed spraying pattern of the Enison Spreader might not concentrate a lot of thermal energy in a narrow area.

Still, as Ves watched the footage of the weapon in action, it looked incredibly impressive, especially to enemy mech pilots who were expected to pass through the flames!

The Enison Spreader was a fairly hefty flamethrower. It was also a sizable one. Wielding it properly required a striker mech to hold it with both hands.

All of these materials added to the cost of the weapon.

In exchange, the flamethrower not only possessed a high heat capacity, but could also resist a few hits without falling apart or exploding in the striker mech's face!

As an extra, while the maximum range of the flamethrower wasn't very great, concentrating the outward spray into a narrow beam still increased its lethality to an incredible degree!

All in all, the Enison Spreader checked all of his essential boxes and a couple of the less important boxes as well.

The only caveat was that it was a fairly expensive addition to his mech design.

"Gloriana probably won't like how I've taken such a considerable chunk out of our budget." He muttered.

He believed it was worth it. While a striker mech had to be fitted with plenty of armor due to its role and its place on the battlefield, Ves didn't feel it had to be as tough as a knight mech.

Neglecting the striker mech's offensive power in favor of increasing its defensive power was the wrong approach.

That said, armor still mattered a lot as striker mechs simply didn't possess the mobility to rely on evasion to negate incoming attacks. Their heavy reliance on capacity and their defensive-minded roles called for them to stand their ground and take the hits on behalf of more vulnerable mechs.

"Well, I can't have everything." He shrugged.

Striker mechs weren't supposed to be punching bags, but they could take a few hits. It didn't matter if they weren't as tough as knight mechs because they never acted by themselves.

The one of the underlying reasons why he wanted to design this mech was because his forces needed to address a shortcoming that their current mech rosters weren't up to the task.

In many other areas, mechs like the Bright Warrior already fulfilled the necessary functions. Adding his striker mech model to the mix would round out the Larkinson Clan's capabilities a bit further.

It was vitally important to patch one of the holes in the mech rosters in order to prevent needless deaths from occurring again!

Once Ves settled on his choice, he recorded the component license in order to discuss its merits with Gloriana.

He stretched his body, only realizing a second later that the sensations of his body were fake.

He looked down at the book. He could return it to its shelf by activating a command, but he figured he might as well see this ritual to the end.

He sought out and retrieved the book the old-fashioned way, so he rose from his chair, picked up the book and walked the short distance to the right shelf in order to put it back.

"Hello."

Ves turned around to see a well-dressed woman in foreign fashion. It resembled a robe in the so-called 'oriental' style, but with a lot of decorative elements that spoke of class and wealth.

This was not an average mech designer. In fact, those who were able to access the MTA's virtual library in this fashion were never mediocre.

"Hello." Ves answered back while studying the blond woman. "Why did you approach me, miss?"

The woman smiled. "Are you Ves Larkinson?"

"I am. Do you know me? I don't recall meeting you. How do you know my name?"

"Do you really have to ask? I watched your interview with the Rimward Star Herald. It is incredibly impressive that you've managed to obtain a masterwork certificate!"

Ah. His fame had already spread to the point where a random mech designer recognized him in a crowd!

He couldn't help but feel a little flattered. He smiled back.

"I didn't do it by myself. I had my girlfriend to lean on, and an unnamed benefactor did most of the heavy lifting."

The other woman chuckled. "You don't have to be modest, Mr. Larkinson. If mech designers could coast on the accomplishments of a Senior or Master, they wouldn't have gotten a masterwork certificate. Only when your involvement is an essential component in the creation of a masterwork will the MTA grant you credit. I'm sure you would have been able to produce a masterwork mech by yourself sooner than later."

Ves nodded. "I don't like to boast too much, but you're right. Anyway, I haven't caught your name."

"You may call me Angelique Harcourt. As you may have surmised, I'm not a native to your star sector. I hail from the Heavensword Association, which is one of several second-rate 'states' of Majestic Teal."

So his initial guesses were true! The woman came from a neighboring star sector, and a very specific one at that!

This was his first time he talked to a native of Majestic Teal in person, just like how William Urbesh was his first acquaintance from Vicious Mountain.

The star sector she called her home was rather odd in many ways. It's second-rate 'states' were rather odd in that they seem to change their territories quite very often without waging any full-blown wars. The customs there were so strange that everyone in the Komodo Star Sector simply didn't see any logic in their neighbor's territorial conflicts!

Though Ves wasn't looking for conversation, his first meeting with someone from Majestic Teal was enough to arouse his curiosity.

"Miss Harcourt, since you are here, I suppose you are a mech designer. What's your specialization?"

"I am a Journeyman like you, though my accomplishments aren't as illustrious as yours." She admitted with a soft expression. "I specialize in designing swordsman mechs. In particular, I excel at designing the fencer sub-type of swordsman mechs. Rather than rely on momentum and brute force to hack an opponent, my mechs utilize a

combination of speed and finesse to inflict targeted attacks onto the enemy weak points while evading as many attacks as possible."

"Ah. So you're designing something similar to light skirmishers."

Fencer mechs were usually light mechs that performed a similar role to their more ubiquitous dagger-wielding counterparts!

Angelique briefly frowned. "Mr. Larkinson. Please do not equate fencer mechs to light skirmishers. The Heavensword Association would never tolerate your ignorance. Be careful in what you say. Fencer mechs are completely different from light skirmishers!"

The way she emphasized her last sentence hinted to Ves that he had touched a very sensitive nerve!

Ves wanted to scratch his head. Fencer mechs were identical to light skirmishers. They were fast, light, melee-oriented and fought their enemies by poking at their weak points.

The only meaningful difference was that light skirmishers often wielded dual daggers while fencer mechs made do with a single sword!

"Please forgive my ignorance, Miss Harcourt. Could you enlighten me what makes fencer mechs different?"

"Certainly, Mr. Larkinson. Would you like to sit down at one of the tables?"

"Sure."

It didn't really matter if they stood or sat down since their physical bodies weren't there, but they sat down anyway.

Harcourt stretched a delicate finger and projected one of her mech designs.

"I believe you are very familiar with light skirmishers. Please compare what you know of this mech type with the fencer mech I've projected. This is one of my latest works, and I'm particularly proud of it. I'm curious to hear what an exalted masterwork mech designer has to say about my efforts."

Harcourt's fencer mech design certainly looked impressive. The second-class mech was largely a landbound mech, though it featured a light application of internal flight modules that allowed it to make large leaps or hops or fly in the air at a lower speed. It could also fly fairly proficiently in space.

Still, it was obvious that the mech's main focus was to fight an opponent on solid ground. The machine immediately screamed dueling mech to Ves due to its focus on peak performance over endurance.

Even though the mech only possessed a limited uptime, it was able to outshine other comparable light mechs! Its speed, strength and most of all precision were unparalleled compared to the likes of the Fliskin, though the comparison wasn't entirely fair since latter had to carry a flight system.

Even so, Ves envisioned the fencer mech as a terror in the mech arenas! As long as the mech pilot was skilled enough to dance around his opponent, he could strike when the probability of suffering a counterattack was low!

Still, Ves didn't see why this mech was any different from a light skirmisher aside from its weapon.

He didn't want to reveal his ignorance, though.

"This is a very well-put together mech." He said. "Though I'm able to envision how it performs in battle, won't you mind sharing some footage with me? Seeing it in battle will help me in evaluating your work."

"Certainly! While I've only released my product a short time ago, it has already attracted a following. Let me browse my database to find the most representative battle footage..."

Chapter 1965 Skill vs Technology

"Fencer mechs are capable of outdueling any melee mechs by themselves." She said. "As you can imagine, my Heavensword Association is incredibly obsessed with swordsmanship. We have developed millions of styles, and many of them revolve around defeating a superior mech with an inferior mech. True glory isn't earned by bullying weaker opponents. It is only attainable to duelists if they can vanquish against a mech that is twice as expensive as theirs!"

Angelique Harcourt conveyed her true feelings on the matter. Her design philosophy centered entirely on fencer mechs, with a particular focus on empowering finesse-based fighting styles.

Ves heard this kind of argument many times. In particular, swordsman mech specialists and mech designers who specialized in designing offensive melee mechs always liked to harp on the merits of centering mech designs around facilitating the skill expression of the mech pilot.

Personally, he possessed a more neutral stance on the matter. While he agreed that it was often best if the mech did not constrain the skill expression of the mech pilot, there were many instances where individual skill just didn't matter.

The hierarchy of mech pilots was shaped like a very broad pyramid. Only a handful of truly skilled mech pilots sat at the top. The majority consisted of a very fat portion of mediocre mech pilots and an even greater number comprised an extremely broad base!

What this effectively meant was that designing mechs around enabling skilled mech pilots to perform their fancy tracks was all well and good, but this market only consisted of 1 percent or less of the entire mech market!

Most general-purpose mechs focused much more on winning the battle through their base performance parameters and individual strengths imparted by their designs.

This was the orthodox approach to mech design. Even in a second-rate state like the Friday Coalition or the Hexadric Hegemony, plenty of mediocre mech pilots existed who despite all of their advanced education and augmentations were still barely good enough to pilot a basic mech!

Therefore, to most people in the mech community, they had to base their decisions around 'average' mech pilots who always needed help from their mechs in order to increase their effectiveness in battle!

As Ves faced the passionate mech designer from the Heavensword Association, he refrained from voicing his true opinion. From what she said so far, he would only get sucked in a pointless argument against someone who would never change her mind on a matter he held close to her heart!

He returned a strained smile at Harcourt. "I understand. Fencer mechs are completely designed to outduel any enemy swordsman mech, spearman mech or other melee mech up front. Different from light skirmishers, they possess enough strength to deflect and redirect incoming blows. Considering how much less strength fencer mechs possess compared to medium mechs, that must be pretty difficult to pull off. One misstep is enough to result in defeat!"

"That's why my customers are all swordmasters." Miss Harcourt grinned in satisfaction. "It's not easy to satisfy the needs of these exalted mech pilots. Admittedly, I have no chance of offering my products to the established swordmasters of my Association, but the younger ones are hungry to prove their skill!"

"Forgive my ignorance, miss. From the inflection of your words, I take it that swordmasters are special in your Association. Am I correct?"

The female mech designer beamed with pride. "Our Heavensword Association produces the best swordsman mech pilots of our star sector! In fact, some of our swordmasters aren't inferior to the best swordsman mech specialists of the Winged Serenade Star Sector! It takes lifelong learning and dedication to become a recognized swordmaster. Even before they start learning how to pilot any swordsman mech, they

begin swinging their swords and practicing the fundamentals of their sword styles when they are old enough to hold a stick!"

The woman blabbered on about the constant and extreme training that swordmasters had to endure in order to become a master of the sword!

Whether in person or in the cockpit of a mech, swordmasters were expected to deliver a brilliant display of swordsmanship!

"The strongest and most skilled swordmaster of our time is always crowned as the Heavensword Saint. As the mech pilot who is the closest to wielding the legendary Heavensword, we believe he is worthy enough to lead our Association!"

The more Ves heard about the Heavensword Association, the less he wanted to hear. The citizens of the Heavensword Association even called themselves sword servants, implying that everyone who wasn't a swordmaster solely existed to serve this warrior class!

Ves pretended to notice the time. "Ah, I'd love to exchange my views on swordsman mechs and fencer mechs with you, but I have just begun to embark on a new design project. The deadline for it is rather tight, and the rest of my design team is awaiting the results of my selection."

"Oh? May I ask what mech you are planning to design?"

"A spaceborn striker mech."

"I see. That's a shame." Angelique's face fell. "If you were designing a swordsman mech, I would have been able to offer some advice to you. Striker mechs are.. rather detestable mechs in my opinion. They require no skill at all to pilot! It is a travesty every time a no-skill mech is capable of defeating a proper swordsman mech!"

That was the entire point. Striker mechs were explicitly designed to counter tricky and maneuverable melee mechs!

They offered a solution to mech forces that didn't possess too many high-skilled mech pilots. Without striker mechs, any formidable opponent would be able to wreak havoc in their midst!

While it sounded dishonorable to rely on technology to neutralize the advantages of skill, the history of war throughout human civilization always revolved around this dynamic.

In ancient human civilization, armies started slinging stones or shooting arrows at their opponents. Regardless of how a king or noble spent a significant amount of money and effort to train a skilled knight or man-at-arms who were deadly at close combat, a single

arrow penetrating a weak point in their armor was enough to make all of that investment go to waste!

As millenia passed and humanity ascended to the stars, humanity still leaned heavily on technology to vanquish its opponents!

Relying on skill was important, but.. aside from prodigies, many mech pilots focused on deepening their skill because they didn't have enough faith in the battle prowess of their mechs.

If their machines weren't good enough because their employers were too cheap or refused to assign them something better, than honing their skills was the only way for these mech pilots to increase their chances of success in battle!

"Maybe I'll design a swordsman mech in the future. It's on my to-do list." Ves casually remarked.

"Please consider getting in touch with me if you do. Whether you just want some advice from someone who has designed mechs that excel in bringing out the strengths of different sword styles, or are in need of a very knowledgeable collaborator, I'm open to any offer!"

Ves smiled. "I appreciate your generous offer. For the time being, I have other matters to attend to. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Mr. Larkinson!"

He pulled his digitized mind out of the MTA's virtual portal shortly afterwards.

Returning his perspective to his real body momentarily disoriented him. The transition happened suddenly without any adjustment time. However, he soon familiarized himself with his own eyes and ears again.

Gloriana was watching him carefully from his side. "How was your first virtual immersion??"

"It's disturbing how closely it mimics reality yet exhibits subtle signs of imperfection that constantly reminds me that it's just a false reality."

"The MTA probably has technology that can present an even more realistic experience." She claimed. "Back when I was residing at Centerpoint, I heard rumors that the MTA has long mastered how to make virtual immersion so realistic that no one is able to distinguish between true and false reality! They mostly keep it to themselves in order to give their own personnel an edge in training and prevent trillions of average people from losing touch with reality!"

That sounded like something the MTA would do. Human civilization may be ascendant in the Milky Way Galaxy and beyond, but their race could easily lose its dominant position if its people grew complacent!

Getting lost in entertainment and ignoring actual concerns in life for the endless pleasures of virtual reality was a common fear to many leaders.

Humans needed to maintain their edge. Growing soft led to weakness. Weakness led to disaster! No matter what, humans needed to remember that life was hard, but necessary!

"This reminds me that I still need to visit the Rim Exchange." Ves suddenly said. "I refrained from visiting its virtual portal because I still had to complete the Bright Warrior design and didn't want to become distracted, but now that I'm not as busy, perhaps I can see what this exclusive club is all about."

"Go ahead, Ves. I'm curious to see what the Rim Exchange has to offer as well. It's a shame I didn't receive an invitation."

She didn't show much remorse, though. Hexers generally preferred to keep a distance from the MTA and its organizations because they had too many males in power.

"I'll be on the lookout for any easy opportunities to earn a lot of merits, though I don't expect to find anything promising. MTA merits shouldn't be so easy to come by, considering they are the primary necessities to extend our lives."

"Before you dive in again, please tell me which flamethrower model you've selected."

He briefly did so, and she accepted his choice, though with obvious reluctance.

"Our budget will strain even further with this choice, Ves. We can invest as much in the armor system of our striker mech design."

"Offense is more important than defense when it comes to striker mechs. If I want a defensive mech, I would have designed a mech that is specialized in taking a beating!"

She couldn't argue with that simple logic, though she didn't feel so good. Second-class striker mechs were much better protected in proportion to all of its other features, but that was an entirely different game.

Once Ves finished his discussion with his girlfriend, he settled on his seat and prepared to enter another virtual immersion. He browsed the interface of his comm until he came across the exclusive virtual entrance of the marketplace of the Rim Guardian Fraternity!

Mech designers and other mech insiders all across the entire galactic rim dreamt of becoming an associate of the Rim Guardians!

Chief among their reasons was obtaining access to their exclusive Rim Exchange. Though it offered many of the same goods and services of the MTA, associates received varying levels of preferential treatment that allowed them to get more out of their precious merits!

Now, Ves would be entering it for the very first time. Though he wasn't sure what to expect, he hoped to find something that would make it easier to fulfill his ambition to become a galactic pioneer!

As his partially-digitized mind entered the Rim Exchange's virtual portal, his senses blanked out once again before depositing him at a brilliant star escape!

Stars surrounded him from every direction as his disembodied eyes floated in the middle of interstellar space!

A symbol of the Rim Guardians slowly lit up in front of his view. A starry chakram with the silhouette of a man at the side looking upwards with hope conveyed a lot of symbolism.

Once it disappeared, an android similar to Delta-Gina appeared into view.

[Welcome to the Rim Exchange, Mr. Larkinson.] The butler-like android with a metallic moustache greeted. [I am Gamma-Gamma-Hogan, your virtual concierge at our illustrious Exchange. Whether you visit our virtual portal or one of our physical branches, I shall always be present to accompany you through our Exchange and assist you in your tasks. You may dismiss me whenever you wish if you do not desire my company.]

If Ves still possessed a body, he would have twitched his mouth. It figured that the Rim Guardians wouldn't do things the normal way.

"Your name is kind of a mouthful. Can I call you Hogan?"

[You have full prerogative to call me anything you wish.]

A thought came to mind. "I'm curious. What are the most common names that virtual concierges like you are called?"

[The top names are 'Bot', 'Stupid Bot', 'Dummy', '\$\u0026#', '##', '@#\u0026\$\u0026', 'Servant', 'AI' and '\$*@\$\$. Would you like to refer to me in one of these popular names instead?]

"No thanks. Hogan will do."

Chapter 1966 Rim Avatar

"So Hogan, as much as I'd like to float around in a fake galaxy a little longer, I was expecting a little more from the Rim Exchange. Could you lead me to the Merit Hall and other places on the platform?"

[You are not ready to enter our platform in your current state, Mr. Larkinson.] The servile virtual android spoke. [As this is the first time you are entering our virtual portal, you must design your humanoid avatar which you will be using to interact with fellow associates and representatives of the Rim Guardians.]

Ves felt puzzled. "So I'm not going to be visiting the Exchange in a copy of my own body?"

[Correct. Here at the Rim Exchange, billions of Associates come together in one of our instanced virtual realities. Mech designers, mech pilots, industrialists and many other noteworthy people from across the galaxy are able to socialize and exchange with each other.]

"So I'll be able to encounter someone who is separated a hundred-thousand light-years away from the Komodo Star Sector?"

Hogan nodded his robotic head. [Technically, that is correct, though by default you will enter an instance that is mostly visited by your fellow associates in your star cluster. You have the option to transfer to a more cosmopolitan instance, but that is not recommended for Journeymen.]

It might be fun to talk to someone who lived on the other end of the galaxy, but the novelty quickly wore off after a time. Aside from conducting a shallow exchange, there was no point in collaborating with someone who was so physically distant.

"Tell me more about these so-called avatars, Hogan. Could you show me some examples as well?"

[Why certainly, Mr. Larkinson. Here is a random selection of Rim Avatars designed by your fellow associates.]

The android waved a hand, causing a carousel of a diverse selection of robotic, human-sized avatars to rotate past his view.

Many of them resembled androids like Delta-Gina and Gamma-Gamma-Hogan, but with much more sophistication in their designs.

Most of them were unclothed, preferring to bare their full technical brilliance to others.

Some of them adhered closely to the human form. Whether they were male or female, they looked human enough to pass off as one if not for their obvious technological appearances.

Others were a bit more creative. One looked like a robotic bear that learned how to walk upright, while another resembled a floating octopus that hovered above the ground using antigrav modules rather than its tentacles.

A substantial minority of avatars even took on the form of mechs on a smaller scale! These human-sized mechs were completely viable in reality. Aside from the lack of mech pilots, these mech-like Rim Avatars were obviously derived from the mech designed by their owners!

What impressed Ves the most about these avatars was that many owners used them as a canvas to express their creativity or send a message!

Some Rim Avatars resembled ancient, corroded relics that one might find in a centuries-old ruin.

Another brilliant avatar even seemed to have been designed according to steampunk principles, operating completely on steam rather than conventional electricity!

Ves didn't need to ask why the Rim Exchange enforced the use of these Rim Avatars.

At least in the case of mech designers, the names and appearances of their fellow colleagues weren't as important as their ability in mech design!

Showcasing their design style and design skill in the form of a personally-designed Rim Avatar provided much more information to others with just a single glance.

The avatar bodies that Hogan showed off all provided Ves with a wealth of information about their owners just by reading their designs!

Some owners were eager to advertise their full abilities. Others were more circumspect and deliberately designed Rim Avatars that revealed as little information about their identities, design styles and skill as possible!

He even encountered a few sloppy, low-effort Rim Avatars that were barely better than cleaning bots in terms of sophistication!

All in all, Ves understood that he could pick any form of Rim Avatar he wished, within certain limits. Rather than a straightforward demonstration of design prowess, the Avatars also functioned as a way to shape to other people's impression of himself.

Whether he wanted to attract attention from others or avoid it like the plague, his unique Rim Avatar would be able to facilitate either desires depending on his design choices!

"What a fun game." Ves curled his non-existent lips into a smile. "It's fitting that a platform that is mostly frequented by mech designers to adopt such a novel custom."

After Ves expressed a desire to design his own Rim Avatar, Hogan waved his robotic hand once again, transferring him to a virtual design studio.

[As a convenience, you do not need to fabricate the components of your Rim Avatar. Merely design your Avatar and its virtual incarnation will immediately appear in front of you. As a level 2 external associate of the Rim Guardian Fraternity, you have access to a slightly wider selection of materials and advanced components.]

"I'm not level 1? Is that normal? What is this level structure?"

[External associates rank from level 1 to level 10. Each new associate starts at level 1, which is the most basic level. It provides no discount on official goods and services offered by the Rim Guardians and your access to various facilities and amenities are subject to many restrictions. At level 2, you receive a 5 percent discount and gain various privileges. This pattern continues at higher levels until you reach level 10, which affords associates with a 45 percent discount on official goods and services as well as many other privileges.]

Forty-five percent! That was a massive discount, especially if that applied to fleet beyonder tickets and life-prolonging treatments!

However, Ves knew that the Rim Guardians weren't generous for nothing. Just like the MTA they hailed from, mech designers probably had to toil for centuries to reach the highest level!

"How can mech designers reach a higher level of associate status?"

[Certain critical missions offer a promotion in rank as an optional or base reward. You can also reach a higher level by advancing to Senior or Master or by making certain important achievements. The reason why you have been promoted to level 2 is because you have received a masterwork certificate. This is an achievement worthy of recognition.]

So that explained it. That was a pretty nice extra, since a 5 percent discount already shaved off 5 million MTA merits off the hefty price of a fleet beyonder ticket!

"Well, let's start."

The design interface was virtually identical to that of a mech design software suite, though with various extra tools designed to cope with the smaller scale of the robotic avatars.

Ves had access to the public library of the MTA if he needed to look up on how to build a robot, and he even had the option of contacting some people if he needed advice or assistance.

He was too proud and confident to rely on others to design his Rim Avatar. He wanted it to become an expression of himself!

He saw no need to play any games and hide his identity behind a deceptive Rim Avatar. Instead, he wanted to translate his design style, his design philosophy and his other design-related traits in the form he chose to represent himself among the associates of the Rim Guardians!

Naturally, he would hold some characteristics back, but he was not afraid of showing other mech designers his distinctive design style!

Besides, anyone who looked up his mech designs would be able to view what he could do anyway.

Though Hogan mentioned that Ves had the option of hiding his identity, he didn't see the point in that. The Rim Exchange was a virtual reality that was fully under the control of the Rim Guardians. Privacy was an illusion and everything happened under the purview of the powerful organization!

As he directed his thoughts to his Rim Avatar, Ves briefly considered his options.

He didn't feel the need to be adventurous and design something that deviated from the human form. He first started drawing a line schematic that largely resembled his actual contours.

Now that he defined the shape and volume of his Rim Avatar, he began to design its internals

A humanoid robot was incredibly simple to make. However, it took a lot of skill and sophistication to design a robot that moved as cleverly as a human and functioned just as well in diverse environments.

Ves considered it a test of some sorts. Fortunately, with his knowledge and skill, developing a robot from the ground up was not a difficult task at all, especially now that he augmented his cognitive functions with his Archimedes Rubal implant!

He quickly designed the internals of his Rim Avatar in a matter of hours. Ves did the best he could in this span of time.

Due to the smaller size and scope of his design, Ves didn't have to spend nearly as much time as he would on a mech design!

While he hadn't made any adventurous design choices with regards to the internals, he made sure to design the inner structure in a way that was robust and reliable even if Ves hadn't subjected it to a lot of optimisation!

With regards to testing and optimisation, the virtual workshop offered many advanced features that quickly analyzed and tested the Rim Avatar's performance in an enormous range of conditions.

Ves saved a lot of days of tinkering with this service!

"How powerful! This kind of assistance is invaluable in mech design!"

Once he finished the internals, he devoted a lot of time to the externals, because that was the most obvious portion that others would judge his avatar.

He decided to unleash a bit of his creativity and go a little wild with regards to its external appearance. He adopted a bronze-like appearance that resembled Lucky's original metallic look. He spiced it up by adding some white and golden accents to the mech.

The Rim Avatar's appearance went past functional and started to adopt an artistic slant. Ves spent hours on fine-tuning the visual design of his Rim Avatar.

At the same time, he also concentrated his mind and tried to realize the vision he constructed in his mind!

As an extra element to his Rim Avatar, Ves wanted to convey a bit of his specialty in it by imparting it with a glow!

Ves didn't put his full effort into it, as he was well aware that the Rim Guardians were recording all of his actions as he worked.

He merely fell back to creating an image of himself and infused it with his own spiritual energy, making extra effort to emphasize his spiritual domain!

The glow that slowly formed inside his metallic bronze avatar began to radiate a subtle aura. Ves deliberately toned it down in order to avoid stirring up a huge amount of people.

Nonetheless, anyone who got close to him or caught his attention would definitely be able to feel that they were in the presence of someone remarkable!

The unique blend of life and mechs that came from his spiritual attributes permeated his increasingly more impressive Rim Avatar like a scent that never went away!

Though an artificial lifeform like Gamma-Gamma-Hogan probably felt nothing from his bronze Rim Avatar, other people would definitely be able to sense its glow!

"This Avatar is missing something... Ah, how could I forget?!"

Ves quickly modified the bald and shiny head structure in order to incorporate a soft-glowing third eye.

Different from the third eye of his mech designs, he decided to keep it oval in order to resemble a human eye shape.

Gloriana didn't have any involvement in designing this Rim Avatar, so Ves had no right to add her signature look to his creation.

Besides, Ves was afraid that he would be mistaken for an oppressed male Hexer if his Rim Avatar paraded a hexagon-shaped eye! Hogan had already mentioned to him that the default instance he was about to enter was frequented by many associates from the Komodo Star Sector!

After fine-tuning the visual glow of the third eye, Ves finally completed his work.

It took a few hours, but Ves was pretty proud of what he came up with. The design tools provided by the Rim Guardians certainly compensated for many of its shortcomings resulting from his haste!

[Have you completed your Rim Avatar, Mr. Larkinson?]

"I have. Does my work meet the Rim Exchange's approval?"

[It does. You may use it as your primary form when you enter one of our venues. Please keep in mind that you may also take control of a physical copy of your Rim Avatar when you visit one of our physical sites.]

Of course they would do something like that. The Rim Guardians could easily materialize his work in a second and deconstruct afterwards when Ves was done his business!

"Alright, let's go!"

[Before you enter the Exchange, you must bestow your work with a name. This will also be your public pseudonym in the Rim Exchange.]

Ves was too impatient to think up something clever. He had enough with these diversions!

"Just call it Lifegiver—, no wait, call it Apollo! Now let me enter!"

A pseudonym like 'Lifegiver' veered uncomfortably close to the Five Scrolls Compact! It was better to pick something more bland like the name of a god!

Unfortunately, he hit a snag that was common to many people who wanted to register a name.

[That particular pseudonym is already taken by a fellow associate.]

"Apollon?"

[That particular pseudonym is already taken by a fellow associate.]

"Goddammit!"

[That particular pseudonym is already taken by a fellow associate.]

"You stupid bot! Call it Apollo Radiant, I'm sure that's not taken yet! Now let me in already!"

[Your Rim Avatar is officially registered as 'Apollo Radiant'. Please stand by for transfer.]

Chapter 1967 Rim Tour

Ves entered one of the main instances of the Rim Exchange for the very first time.

He emerged in the middle of a plaza. Once the bronze-like robotic form of his Apollo Radiant finished its entry into this virtual setting, he looked around in wonder through his simulated artificial sensors.

"Impressive."

The Rim Exchange simulated a city from a first-rate state. The hypermodern architecture vaguely resembled the sights he had seen when he entered the mind of Axelar Streon during a past Mastery experience.

Perhaps this cityscape wasn't anything special to the Terrans or the Rubarthans, but to the hicks from the galactic rim, this was more than enough to steal anyone's breath away at first sight!

As Ves admired the vista, he eventually noted some incongruities. Certain floating structures or structures on land looked out of place from the rest of the city. Their appearances exhibited a different style and different construction.

They ranged from ancient wooden temples, starships, alien forests and other settings!

When he concentrated on what looked like a church, a pop-up box appeared in his view.

[New Apostolic Church of Granada Prime

Total value: 64,035,245 MTA merits

Accessibility: open to the public at all times

Message: Christ is a mech designer! Find out why by stepping inside!]

Ves had to make sure his optical sensors were working correctly. A church was allowed to exist in the Rim Exchange?

It seemed as if anyone could buy some real estate in this instance as long as they had enough merits on hands!

After he was done admiring the virtual setting, he directed to himself.

Unlike his previous visit to the MTA's public library, he didn't appear in his own body this time.

Instead, his current 'body' comprised of his Rim Avatar!

The experimentally flexed his fingers and moved his robotic limbs. His bronze-like shell held up well as he had leveraged most of his mech design expertise into fashioning himself a good artificial body.

More importantly than that, his Apollo Radiant avatar also exuded a glow that was already turning the heads of nearby Rim Avatars!

One avatar shaped like a fat, robotic walrus in a formal suit was openly gawking at Ves' much slimmer form like he was the only alien among a crowd of humans!

In fact, dozens of others who had just beamed into the same plaza were attracted to his glow as well!

"Apollo Radiant, how come you're only level 2?"

Ves' robotic face scrunched in a frown. "How do you know that?"

"You.. don't know?"

"I'm new here. This is my first time entering the Rim Exchange."

"That's impossible!" The Walrus bellowed! "You're level 2!"

"I don't need to explain myself to you. How do you know I'm a level 2 associate?"

The Walrus finally started to look unsure of his guess. "You're really new?"

"Yes." Ves said with an exasperated sigh.

"Oh. Well, you can study our details by activating one of the settings of this virtual immersion."

"How can I access the settings?"

"Your virtual concierge should tell you this, but he is probably waiting outside. Just call up an interface from your comm."

Ves did so, and saw that he had access to a lot of functions. Once he browsed the settings, he activated an overlay option.

Pseudonyms instantly appeared above everyone's head. Like a game, Ves started seeing names like 'Brozard Lakeman' or 'Master of Spears'.

In addition, as long as Ves concentrated a little, he could call up the level of the associate, and depending on the privacy setting of the Rim Avatar, the name of the associate, their location, their mech designer rank if applicable and a brief summary of their record!

Ves quickly browsed his own privacy settings and saw that it was set to the highest privacy setting by default.

Though he wasn't afraid of announcing his identity and showing off his impressive accomplishments for a Journeyman, he decided to be a bit more reserved than planned and left his privacy settings alone.

After he became more accustomed to moving his Apollo Radiant avatar, Ves began to head to the exit of the plaza.

A large amount of virtual concierges awaited outside. Gamma-Gamma-Hogan soon walked up to him. [Apollo Radiant, please accompany me so that I introduce you to the Rim Exchange. There are several essential rules and customs you need to be aware of before you proceed to make use of our platform.]

"Very well."

The two walked away from the crowded plaza while the AI began to show him ropes. He began to instruct him on how to change his settings on his comm, which he already knew.

[The instance you see here is one of many instances which may look different.] Hogan robotically explained. [Some instances are set on lunar surfaces, while others are set in the interior of an ark ship. No matter the specific setting, the structures here are divided into two categories. The majority of them are operated by the Rim Guardians. The merit hall is one of the most important structures which we will reach at the end of the tour.]

The two walked forward until they stopped in front of one of the structures with foreign architecture.

[The Rim Exchange offers certain parcels for sale to associates interested in establishing a permanent virtual presence in a particular instance. It is generally not recommended for new and low-level associates to purchase the right to build a virtual structure in the Rim Exchange due to the prohibitive cost of MTA merits.]

That was for sure! Even this small structure that was close to one of the plazas already cost more than 20,000,000 MTA merits!

A centuries-old geezer could gain an extra century of life with that amount of merits!

"I'm not interested. Let's move on, Hogan."

[Very well.]

The instance resembled a city for a very good reason. There were so many Associates here that a lot of city districts were needed to accommodate them all in the same virtual setting!

Most of the buildings were actually used for something.

The city offered virtual workplaces for associates to get some work done.

The city also offered virtual workshops where associates could collaborate or compete against each other as they designed and fabricated virtual mechs with a very high degree of realism factor.

However, Ves soon discovered that most of the buildings weren't very relevant to his interests. He just wanted to use the Rim Exchange to earn a lot of merits. He wasn't interested in hanging out here all day in order to socialize or expand his network.

Still, he did maintain some interests towards the other associates. Everywhere he went, he could see Rim Avatars walking the streets or chatting with each other.

Most Rim Avatars seemed to be traveling alone. A few had their virtual concierges by their side.

Almost everyone walked on foot. There were no vehicles available and the only way that someone like Ves could access a floating building was to enter one of the 'invisible' elevators that lifted his body off the ground at a slow and agonizing pace.

A few Rim Avatars didn't seem constrained by gravity, though. A handful of very impressive-looking artificial bodies zipped past his head with no concern for the people below!

"How come those Rim Avatars can fly?"

[Associates who are level 6 and up receive the privilege to fly in any branch of the Rim Exchange. Please be respectful to these individuals. The ability to fly is only granted to associates who have contributed significantly to the Rim Guardians.]

"I understand."

These higher-leveled people were probably Master Mech Designers or something!

What he found the most interesting about watching other associates was the way they presented themselves in the form of their Rim Avatars.

Though plenty of associates choose to hide their strengths and traits, there were still a lot of Rim Avatars who openly displayed their design talents!

His eyes were certainly opened at that moment. He encountered a diverse varieties of design philosophies, ranging from the conventional to the extreme, just by studying the way their owners designed their Rim Avatars!

One lady for example seemed to specialize in designing heavy artillery mechs. Her Rim Avatar probably reached the maximum-allowable dimensions and mass as her gun-infested Avatar had to squeeze through the extra-large doors in order to enter a building!

Another associate seemed to specialize in bestial mechs as he trotted down the street at a quick pace in centaur form!

All in all, there was a lot of gawking going around. Everyone watched everyone. Whether they only directed a brief glance or stared at someone else's Rim Avatar as if it was the most beautiful robot in the galaxy, no one seemed to be very shy about checking each other out!

Sometimes, associates interested in someone else's specialty or design style began to approach them in order to chat.

Just like the MTA's public library, this entire Rim Exchange tried to foster a lot of exchanges, friendships and cooperation!

Evidently, the MTA heavily encouraged its associates to socialize with each other. Was the Association afraid that every mech designer would turn into nerds if they weren't maintaining enough human contact?

Even Ves started to receive some interest! A couple had already approached him, mostly due to Apollo Radiant's glow!

"I'm sorry, but as you can see and hear, I'm in the middle of my introductory tour."

Rejection was fairly common at the Rim Exchange, so no one took his rejection personally. It wasn't as if there was any way to insist on a conversation. The Rim Guardians were watching them so closely that any improper or untoward behavior would immediately result in a temporary ban!

The tour took more than an hour.

Hogan first guided him to the district where the business network resided.

[For the business-minded associate, this district offers many ways to grow your business. You can sign special contracts enforced by the MTA here. You can find business partners from different parts of the galactic rim to make business deals. You can also obtain a referral if you desire a specific good or service.]

"I already know that." Ves waved his robotic hand. "Lieutenant Ferct already gave me the description on the basic services available at the Rim Exchange. What I want to know is how much merits it costs for services related to expanding my business to a different star sector."

[Without applying discounts, it costs 10,000 MTA merits to guarantee a business contract in your native star sector. It costs 50,000 MTA merits to guarantee a contract in a different star sector. It costs 100,000 MTA merits to gain access to the distribution network of the RG Logistics. It costs 10,000,000 MTA merits to gain access to the distribution network of the entire galactic rim. Please keep in mind that every contract abides by a standard structure and must be subject to approval by the Rim Guardians.]

Those were some very significant prices! MTA merits were notoriously hard to obtain in great amounts.

While access to a distribution network that spanned the entire galactic rim for just 10,000,000 MTA merits sounded like a bargain, it was in effect a lot more complicated than that. Hogan informed Ves that he would still have to pay a lot of transportation costs in order to ship his products to different star sectors and star clusters!

The greater the distance, the higher the price!

No matter what, the Rim Guardians still made sure they earned a profit from any of the business activities of their associates!

Though the merit prices for most of these services sounded reasonable, Ves was in no hurry to make use of them. Ves already learned it was far too easy to spend his MTA merits than to earn them! Before he built up his savings, he should refrain from squandering this precious resource!

One thing was for sure. These services were very popular among associates as a lot of Rim Avatars constantly entered the buildings that offered them! Obtaining the backing of the Rim Guardians was a powerful way to make sure that a foreign business partner from another star sector wouldn't renege on a deal!

Chapter 1968 Business Alliances

Granada Prime was an instance of the Rim Exchange centered around the three star sectors of Komodo, Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal.

As Gamma-Gamma-Hogan continued to guide Ves around the stunning cityscape that would fit right at home in a first-rate state, they traversed from one end of the open districts to the other end. They paused at various notable structures along the way, each of which offered various goods and services that couldn't be found elsewhere outside the Mta!

The various venues offered dazzling offerings that focused a lot on enhancing the capabilities of mech pilots and mech designers. Ves encounter a dizzying selection of high-class implants, superior gene mod templates and even personal tutoring sessions from Masters!

His Rim Avatar's three eyes stared obsessively at some of the most valuable offerings. Certain products such as advanced gene optimization treatments, auto designer mainframes and materializers could completely transform his life and boost his productivity to insane levels!

Yet as soon as a popup box appeared in his view, he couldn't help but wince and regretfully turn his robotic avatar's head away.

"Too expensive!"

All of these products vastly exceeded his budget!

Some products were easier to obtain than others because they were priced in both credits and merits. The latter was very difficult to obtain, but the former was just a question of wealth.

As long as someone's daddy was rich enough, it was still possible to purchase a materializer without slaving away on behalf of the Rim Guardians!

"It's pointless, though."

A single materializer may be a fine machine to someone like Gloriana who specialized in custom mechs, but the cost did not outweigh the benefits.

The amount of money required to purchase the lowest-quality materializer was enough to purchase a couple of planets!

Mech designers were better off investing in a high-quality mech manufacturing complex or a well-equipped factory ship.

Other products failed to convey enough value in his opinion. The Rim Exchange may have made more of the MTA's exclusive products available to its associates, but their prices were hardly lower!

"It's all about the discount." Ves realized over the course of his tour.

The discount an associate could obtain was vitally important. As a mech designer continued to increase his value and contribute to the Rim Guardians, their associate level rose, thereby lowering the prices of the products offered by the fraternity by increments of 5 percent.

It was not that difficult to obtain a couple of levels. However, the further you rose, the harder it was to reach the next threshold!

Yet leveling up was very much worth it in the long term. The Rim Guardians offered a near-global discount on all of its products and services at higher levels of associate status.

Right now, Ves was merely level 2, but he already obtained a 5 percent discount on every offering, including the fleet beyonder ticket that he had always been aiming for since the start of the new generation!!

The one caveat to the discount was that it didn't apply to goods and services offered by other associates and third-parties. The Rim Guardians generally didn't meddle with private transactions unless the associates paid a lot of merits to guarantee the contract.

This meant that if Ves got scammed, he only had himself to blame!

[Higher levels of associate status also conveys other perks.] Hogan robotically explained as they passed through a widely-frequented avenue. A lot of Rim Avatars paused and stared at Apollo Radiant's bronze-like form as they became affected by its subtle but alluring glow. [At level 2, 4 and 6, you gain access to increasingly higher

qualities of exotics that you can apply to your Rim Avatar. At level 10, you may even invent materials that do not exist in reality!]

That wasn't as valuable as the discount those higher levels offered. Still, Ves could see the value in upgrading the Rim Avatar.

More expensive and impressive ones always attracted a lot of attention. Just like how great clothing could improve someone's image, a more sophisticated Rim Avatar could instantly command attention!

Ves had encountered plenty of scenes where a level 4 or a level 6 associate attracted dozens of lower-leveled mech designers!

The Rim Exchange was not just a venue for trade. It was also a platform for cooperation.

Every mech designer who was able to enter the Rim Exchange consisted of some of the best and most talented mech designers of their respective star sectors. No one who managed to earn the approval of the Rim Guardians were average!

These talented and capable mech designers weren't interested in collaborating with the riffraff of their states. They were much more interested in combining their strengths with equals!

To foster partnerships and collaborations, certain associates purchased real estate at Granada Prime and other instances in order to start a club.

These clubs adopted various forms, but Ves noted that most of them adopted a model similar to that of the Clifford Society.

The more senior members of the clubs or associations offered various rewards to the lower ranks. All the junior members needed to do was to contribute to the club.

Ves wasn't very attracted to these associations. He was very much aware that the clubs were mostly set up to enrich the associates at the top. The lower ranks were mostly treated as slaves or free labor.

Still, plenty of Journeymen and other lower-leveled associates seemed to take part in these clubs, particularly if they offered market access or extensive collaborations in major design projects.

Hogan pointed at one of the virtual headquarters at the side of the street. [Many of our associates join together to form business alliances. It is well worth it to apply to join these business alliances. If you are an entrepreneur, then the market access, opportunities for collaboration and frequent exchanges are very beneficial to your progression. According to one of our studies, associates who have joined a business

alliance or comparable cooperative organization have advanced from Journeyman Senior 34.5362342332 percent higher than associates who have declined to follow suit.]

That was quite a hefty difference, but Ves knew that Hogan was only mentioning this fact because the Rim Guardians wanted him to partner up with other associates.

The more the associates worked together, the more the Rim Guardians benefited! Aside from deriving more profit out of them, partnerships and alliances also fostered more closeness to the Rim Guardians!

Though Ves saw a lot of benefits in joining these organizations, for now he reserved his judgement. A part of him felt that he could already get everything he wanted from the Rim Exchange alone.

Their tour eventually came to an end when Gamma-Gamma-Hogan guided his Rim Avatar to the foot of a tall structure known as the merit hall.

[The merit hall is the primary source of MTA merits to associates. The Rim Guardians offer many different missions, each of which reward its takers with varying amounts of MTA merits and other rewards.]

"How many merits do these missions reward on average?"

[That varies wildly between mission issuers, mission types, mission lengths, mission difficulties, level restrictions, rank restrictions, risk factors and other variables. On average, a level 2 Journeyman such as you earns 29,454 MTA merits per successfully completed mission.]

That.. didn't sound very much. His avatar's robotic face didn't hide his dismay at this paltry amount of merits.

It wasn't even enough to fill the gaps between his teeth!

If his level remained the same, then he needed to earn 95 million MTA merits in order to earn his own passage to the Red Ocean!

If he earned around 30,000 merits per mission, he would have to complete 31,667 missions in order to become a galactic pioneer!

"I'll probably be a thousand years old by the time I earn enough merits!"

By then, fleet beyonder tickets were completely moot! In fact, the galaxy would probably look completely different from today! Ves wasn't even sure whether the MTA and the Rim Guardians would still be around in the distant future!

"Can you describe the missions that my fellow associates at my level are taking?"

[Most of the associates at your level perform missions that call for designing specific mechs that have to perform well under unique and difficult circumstances. Aside from that, your peers also accept missions that task them with tutoring younger mech designers or compete at various mech design competitions.]

"I see."

None of them sounded particularly risky or challenging. Ves recalled that he received 50,000 merits from the Rim Guardians after he turned Silent William into an expert candidate.

Considering the immense difficulty of pushing any mech pilot through the extraordinary threshold, his mission was at least twice as difficult as the typical missions performed by his peers!

Of course, Ves did not intend to perform another mission like this. He needed to earn a lot of merits. Missions that only offered tens of thousands of merits were completely useless to him! The distraction would even detract from his goals!

[This ends my tour. Do you still require my assistance?]

"No thanks, Hogan. I think I'll be able to do fine here on my own."

[Very well, Apollo Radiant. You may summon me with your comm whenever you wish.]

Gamma-Gamma-Hogan soon disappeared through a dematerialization effect.

It didn't really matter if Ves dragged his robot butler around everywhere, but he felt a bit uncomfortable about being stared at by a Benny that wasn't under his control.

He entered the merit hall. He passed by various displays of great masterwork mechs and greater mech designers. As Ves glanced at the displays, the pop-up boxes helpfully enlightened him to what made them worthy to be put on display.

After passing by this display, he entered one of several enormous halls that held hundreds of Rim Avatars.

The associates had all gathered here for several reasons.

Most of the Rim Avatars were closely watching the giant projected mission boards. They keenly observed the new additions to the board like a hawk. As long as an attractive exclusive mission emerged, scores of Rim Avatars immediately tried to accept them! Only the ones with the fastest reaction time managed to obtain the exclusive mission!

Not every mission was exclusive. There were plenty of open missions which rewarded the first associate who completed them first.

The associates weren't very eager to perform these missions. They were usually difficult or time-consuming. What was worse was that there was always a chance that their hard work would be in vain as long as others submitted their results a little bit earlier!

Ves browsed the various missions on display.

[Design Mission

Design a landbound ranged mech that can resist intense electromagnetic storms.

Reward: 25,000 MTA merits]

[Exploration Mission

Accompany a second-class expeditionary fleet tasked by the Rim Guardians to explore an anomalous megaplanet in the deep frontier. Design or modify mechs that function well in this difficult environment.

Be aware that the gravity of the megaplanet is estimated to be 8.9 g. Any associate who wishes to perform this mission must prove their ability to design a mech adapted to the megaplanet's extreme environmental conditions.

Reward: 475,000 MTA merits]

[Research Mission

Take part in a research group tasked with studying and deciphering ancient alien war machines. Not all war machines are analogous to mechs.

Your reward is in direct proportion to your contribution to the research group.

Reward: 1,000 MTA merits - 100,000 MTA merits]

"Well." His Apollo Radiant avatar placed its metal hands on its metal hips. "It's just as I've expected. Earning merits is anything but easy!"

Opportunities to earn 1 million merits or more were not only rare and difficult but also locked behind restrictions!

[Design Mission

Design a complete product group of spaceborn mechs for an expeditionary fleet that is tasked with exploring the Nyxian Gap. The exact details and requirements of this mission are classified and will only be revealed to qualified mission takers.

Prerequisite: level 6 associate mech designer OR Master Mech Designer.

Reward: 4,500,000 MTA merits, 20,000 MTA credits.]

"Damn!"

Chapter 1969 Merit Hall

Contrary to his hopes, none of the missions offered by the merit hall offered him a great bargain. He wouldn't be able to cheat his way into earning lots of merits by taking advantage of one of his unique strengths to complete the missions with much less effort than the mission issuers expected.

The easier missions offered low rewards. The most lucrative missions imposed huge requirements.

The only missions that seemed somewhat interesting to him were the risky missions. Yet Ves did not feel like risking his life for months or years just to earn 500,000 merits or so. If the Rim Guardians wanted him to risk his life for riches, then they better offer him a bigger pot of gold!

His Apollo Radiant avatar grimaced even further as he rapidly scanned through hundreds of missions.

Since Ves had entered the Granada Prime instance, most of the missions took place in the vicinity of the Komodo, Vicious Mountain or Majestic Teal Star Sectors.

Some of the missions even took place in other locations such as the deep frontier or the Winged Serenade Star Sector.

Ves studied the missions that took place in the Komodo Star Sector and began to get a better grasp on what the Rim Guardians wanted to accomplish.

Hardly any of the missions involved the second-rate states or the ongoing wars. There weren't any missions that tasked associates with assisting the Fridaymen in the Komodo War or offering a new mech to aid the defending side of the Sand War.

Instead, the missions ranged from helping obscure individuals, instructing random talents and most of all designing mechs for all kinds of weird and anomalous environments.

"Looks like the MTA is especially interested in the deep frontier and the Nyxian Gap."

Both of them were explainable to Ves. Officially, the MTA's mandate ended at the borders of human space. While the MTA was still permitted to dispatch its warfleets to the frontier, that would inevitably raise the hairs of the CFA.

The frontier belonged to the CFA! The MTA officially had no business in the frontier, but the situation was anything but simple.

Even though the MTA couldn't enter the frontier itself, there was no rule prohibiting third parties from exploring the regions of space unclaimed by human civilization.

While associates like Ves were very much related to the Rim Guardians and the MTA, they weren't formally members. This freed them from the rules constraining mechers.

Still, as lucrative as these missions appeared, the risks were highly unpredictable.

On a good day, no alien space horror ambushed their fleet. On a bad day, the planet they landed on turned out to hide a horrible alien superorganism that instantly engulfed every human at night!

In addition, expeditions to the frontier also made the associates dependent on the protection of others unless they brought their own fleet!

Ves happened to possess his own fleet, but he was a bit more hesitant than before about exposing his Larkinson clansmen to the dangers of the frontier.

On one hand, he wanted to push his clansmen and harden them for the challenges to come.

On the other hand, he wanted to protect his fellow Larkinsons and prevent any further harm from befalling them. He couldn't afford to let any other Larkinson die under his watch!

"This is too difficult!"

His robotic avatar sighed and turned away from the mission board. There wasn't anything that stood out to him at the moment. Perhaps once he reached the Sentinel Kingdom he might revisit the merit hall in order to accept a mission that took place in the Nyxian Gap.

For some reason, the MTA was very interested in this anomalous space. The MTA and the Rim Guardians dispatched a lot of scouting expeditions to the frontier in order to delve its secrets or chart a new route to some of the more interesting asteroids in the Nyxian Gap.

Some missions even offered rewards ranging from 5 million MTA merits or an increase in associate level!

Ves noted that a handful of young and daring associates were eying these incredibly rewarding missions.

However, they never accepted them alone.

Many of the more difficult and complicated missions allowed for associates to complete them as a group as opposed to individually.

The merit hall therefore offered a lot of space for associates to team up and complete a mission together.

The only downside to teaming up was that the associates had to split up the rewards among themselves.

"Looking for Journeyman specialized in aerial mechs or flight systems to design a mech that can fly on a corrosive atmospheric planet! Seeking Majestic Teal mech designers only!"

"Looking for mech athletes that have won at least one sector-wide competition to test our prototypes of our upcoming competition mechs! You must be proficient in piloting both knight mechs, spearman mechs and swordsman mechs!"

"We are accepting a Journeyman to accompany us to the Faris Star Region in order to complete a mission based in the territory of the former sandman race! The CFA have already wiped out the sandman in the frontier, so there is absolutely no risk! Come join us now and earn some easy merits!"

By far, most of the Rim Avatars shouting in the hall consisted of lower-leveled associates. Most of them appeared to be Journeymen, though there were a handful that seemed to be Apprentices.

Ves assumed that Seniors and upwards had other means to pool their strengths together. The lively atmosphere at the merit hall was much more appealing to younger people.

None of these calls sounded appealing to him. Right now was not a good time to accept a mission anyway.

His avatar turned away from the crowd of Rim Avatars looking for team members and walked towards the exit of the hall.

"Apollo! Apollo Radiant! Wait a moment!"

An associate jogged over and halted in front of Ves. His form resembled a spaceborn light skirmisher, but was replete with excessive decorations.

The whole theme of the Rim Avatar revolved around a silver angel. The flight system shaped in the form of wings looked particularly striking.

It was too bad that the rest of the mech was covered with too many icons scrollwork that didn't mesh together very well.

Ves studied the popup box. It didn't reveal anything more than the associate's level, rank and pseudonym.

This fellow was just a level 1 Journeyman.

"What do you want, Holy Clarkson?"

"Your avatar is very impressive! I don't know how you are able to affect my emotions, but your artistry and ability to manipulate emotions is exactly what we need!"

Ves crossed his arms. "What mission are you trying to complete?"

"It's a Design Mission set in Majestic Teal. The mission calls for entering a prestigious design competition. We have to design a mech that is scored in two aspects, performance and beauty. The winning entries must be both strong and beautiful!"

"I'm not interested.?? He said.

He had no plans of entering the Majestic Teal Star Sector anytime soon. He still had to reach to Hegemony-aligned space before he could think about traveling somewhere else, and that would certainly take a couple of months!

"You don't have to physically present at the competition site! At least one of us is already on site to represent our team!"

"How many merits does the mission reward?"

"250,000 MTA merits."

Ves raised his eyebrows. "That's a very lucrative mission for participating and winning a design competition."

"The competition involves a lot of interests, some of which are based in different star clusters. Keep in mind that the full amount will only be rewarded for winning the competition. If we take second place or lower, we will only earn a fifth of the merits."

"I see. How many people are in your team?" Ves asked the most important question.

"We already number three associates. With you, we'll be four. Originally, I planned to solicit another associate, but with your specialty, I don't think we need any further help!"

Ves instantly frowned. Splitting the reward four ways meant that he wouldn't be earning as many merits as he liked!

Even though the competition wouldn't take a lot of time, Ves didn't feel very comfortable if he wasn't in charge.

"How will the reward be split up?"

"One part each and two parts to our team leader. She's not on the Rim Exchange at the moment but I can always call her up right away."

That meant that in the event of winning the competition, Ves and Holy Clarkson would only earn 50,000 MTA merits. Meanwhile, the team leader earned a whopping 100,000 MTA merits.

While he understood this split, he didn't agree with it. He wasn't really interested in this mission to begin with. If it was up to him, he would rather take part in it by himself and collaborate with Gloriana to design his competition mech.

"I'm sorry, but I'm too preoccupied to participate in any competitions. I bid you good luck in finding an associate who can contribute to your competition entry."

"Wait! Don't go! I think you'll do great in the competition! Let me call my team leader to negotiate with you! We can chip in some extra rewards if the merits aren't enough!"

Ves straightforwardly pushed the angelic avatar aside. Holy Clarkson attempted to approach him, but he already activated an ignore function that left his entreaties unanswered.

Once he stepped outside the merit hall, Ves looked up in the simulated air and floating palaces and sighed.

He witnessed enough for one day. Browsing the missions at the merit hall revealed that earning millions of MTA merits at a time was unrealistic.

As a Journeyman and a low-level associate, most of the missions available to him weren't very attractive.

Certainly, it was very much viable to accumulate millions of MTA merits by performing low-risk mission after low-risk mission.

From what he saw, many associates favored this steady approach.

If Ves didn't have any great ambitions, then he would have followed this trajectory as well.

Unfortunately, he couldn't afford to take it slow. The Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy continued to beckon to him, but its call only lasted for a couple of decades!

As Ves was about to log out of the virtual immersion, Gamma-Gamma-Hogan suddenly appeared by his side.

[Apollo Radiant, you have received a priority meeting request. An associate called Green Golem wishes to meet with you in a private venue. Do you wish to accept this request?]

Who the hell was Green Golem?

"Uh, no. I'm just about to leave."

[Please consider attending this meeting. Green Golem requested a meeting with Ves Larkinson, not Apollo Radiant.]

Ves paused just before he pressed the logout command. He turned to his concierge.

"Lead the way."

Hogan led him to a lively district that hosted a lot of restaurants and drinking establishments. The android guided Ves to a winehouse.

One interesting detail about this virtual immersion experience was that its fidelity was a lot higher!

Unlike the sense of falseness and incongruity that bothered him throughout his stay in the MTA's virtual library, his senses were much more comfortable at the Rim Exchange.

This not only translated to a better sense of sight and smell, but also taste and touch.

It was perfectly possible to order food and drink in this virtual illusion and still experience the wonderful blend of smells and flavors they had to offer!

After ascending a few floors, Hogan finally stopped in front of a private room.

"Please enter."

When Ves entered the drinking room, he briefly glanced at the tall windows that offered a magnificent view of Granada Prime before turning to the only occupant.

Green Golem did not look as Ves expected.

Rather than a green mech or some kind of stone monster covered in grass, Green Golem avatar instead consisted of lots of brilliant green crystals!

While Ves was unable to determine if there was some metallic components inside the crystal avatar, he nonetheless found the avatar very impressive.

"Ves. I wish we could meet on better terms. I always wanted to call you again, but with the current circumstances, I'm unable to reach out to you."

"Tristan. It's been a long time. Are you aware that it's not very wise to meet with me? I'm not exactly on good terms with the Friday Coalition anymore."

"I know. I hope it doesn't affect our friendship, though. Let's talk it out."

Ves decided to accept Tristan's proposal and sat down on the other side of the table. Tristan's avatar carefully gripped a glass of wine and poured a glass for his guest.

Chapter 1970 Opposite Sides

Even though Ves hadn't integrated any taste and digestion functions in his avatar, the virtual setting conveniently ignored that detail and allowed him to taste the wine as close to reality as the simulation allowed.

An indeterminate silence followed as both avatars sipped the wine.

"Interesting avatar design." Ves spoke up. "What is the idea behind its appearance?"

"My avatar represents my specialty. After listening to your advice in one of our previous talks, I did some soul-searching. After incorporating the lessons I learned at the trials held by the Rim Guardians, I eventually found a calling that I can call my own. I shifted my design philosophy in a direction that I'm truly interested in. While my current situation doesn't allow me to develop my new area of interest, I am still a lot more confident about my career than before."

"That sounds great. So what is your design philosophy all about?"

"As you know, Master Katzenberg specializes in material substitution. As her direct disciple, I've inherited much of her discipline, but unlike her I work better with some materials than others. After we played around with lithic mechs during our trials, I discovered that I possess a good affinity for non-metallic materials. After a lot of study and experimentation, I've settled on specializing in gems."

"What?" Ves sat up a little straighter in his chair!

"I'm not talking about ordinary gemstones, of course." The Green Golem avatar calmly continued as if Tristan anticipated Ves' surprise. "Humanity has come across countless exotic materials. The most interesting exotics to mech designers are metallic exotics and exotics that are useful in enhancing the properties of alloys. That still leaves out a lot of exotics that fall outside these categories. While not as ubiquitous as metallic exotics, gemstone exotics have their own strengths and isn't nearly as researched."

"You won't have as much competition than if you decided to specialize in metallic exotics." Ves noted. "That's pretty smart. I haven't worked with a lot of gems before. How do they actually work?"

Ves was very interested in Tristan's answer.

The Green Golem avatar smiled. "The gems that I am interested in aren't very common in third-class mech designs. In second-class mechs and above, installing precious gems on specific components can result in noticeable performance gains! The advantages of this approach is obvious. Gemstone exotics don't take up a lot of capacity, but their effects are very noticeable!"

What!? Ves was a lot more shocked than his Apollo Radiant showed.

What Tristan just described sounded very similar to how Lucky's gems worked!

"How do these gems amplify the performance of mechs?"

"You can't slap a gem in a random section of the mech. Gems have special catalyzing or amplifying properties that need to be leveraged by modifying the components of a mech in order to make good use of them. While the power they bestow to a mech is noticeable, there are many limitations regarding their usage."

"Such as?"

"Some gems last indefinitely, but most slowly wear out in time. They can last as short as a single battle or decades of constant use! One of the ambitions I've developed is to find a way to slow down the degradation rate of gemstone exotics. The other important limitation of gemstone exotics are their limited effects. Due to their size, most gemstones are only able to amplify specific performance parameters by a couple percent. There are gemstones that can do more, but their rarity and value makes them difficult to obtain!"

Ves tried to keep his shock in check by comparing Tristan's description of gemstone exotics to Lucky's gems.

As far as he knew, the gems produced by Lucky never degraded over time or with use. Some of his older mechs such as the Shield of Samar still performed at close to optimal levels.

Other mechs which Ves embedded with Lucky's gems also showed very little problems regarding their usage!

He wondered whether Lucky's gems were related to Tristan's gemstone exotic specialization at all. Despite their commonalities, they might be two completely different categories of materials!

Tristan glanced at Ves with interest. "You seem very intrigued by my new specialty. Others haven't shown as much attention as you. They usually dismiss gemstones as marginal exotics that are too overpriced and scarce to be of any use in mass market mechs."

Ves' avatar awkwardly smiled. "I think it is still a very helpful way of amplifying the performance of custom mechs. That's where they are used the most, right?"

"They show up frequently in our expert mechs. In fact, one of the reasons why the Friday Coalition is interested in securing the lesser states is to secure a greater supply of gemstone exotics. Their distribution pattern doesn't completely conform to the distribution pattern of other exotics. The frontier is also an excellent source of rare gemstone exotics. Controlling a trade route from the border of human space to the Friday Coalition has always been a priority to us. Sometimes, that obsession can lead to awful outcomes."

The conversation suddenly turned towards a touchy subject. Ves' avatar looked emphatically at Green Golem. The green, crystalline construct calmly resumed sipping the glass of wine.

"You told me that you are involved in some sort of secret research group. How much do you know about what has occurred to me in the last few months?"

"I've heard quite a bit. While I don't have access to the galactic net during ordinary times, I've worked hard to receive some dispensations. I'm only allowed to connect to the MTA's virtual portals. Once I entered the Rim Exchange, I was able to obtain some public news. You showed up frequently in many industry publications recently."

"I see. Those articles also mentioned my problems with your government, right?"

"Right." Tristan answered.

Well, at least Tristan didn't try to proclaim ignorance. Since he called Ves for a meeting, he should have been prepared to confront this subject.

"Urgh, let me be straight. I don't like your state at the moment. In fact, I hate the Friday Coalition. Going after me is one thing. Going after my subordinates is somewhat understandable. It's my fault if they died in my service. What I can't accept however is your state's decision to persecute my family members in the Bright Republic!"

"I agree that the CRC's actions went too far. If I was in charge, I would have never allowed such a travesty to take place."

Ves chuckled morosely. "I'm glad you're a decent person, but it seems the CRC isn't run by the likes of you. Before all of this happened, I always had a good opinion of the

Friday Coalition. Even if I drifted to the other side of the Komodo War, my respect for your state remained intact."

"Our leaders are different from the masses. That is true in every state. The key distinction between lesser states and greater states is that there are a lot more rungs on the ladder. The more rungs in the hierarchy, the greater the separation between the leaders and the common citizens. The leaders of the partners of the Coalition are in charge of ruling over a huge amount of people, a sea of star systems and an immense amount of resources. It's impossible for them to remain in their positions if they are willing to sacrifice the needs of the state for the needs of a minority."

"And that excuses going after my family?!"

"I don't agree with my leadership, Ves! I just wanted to convey that their decision makes sense from a rational cost-benefit analysis."

Ves twitched when he heard the word 'rational'. He began to hate this word more and more, especially when it was used to justify betrayal!

He lowered his head and sighed. "What's done is done. The CRC has crossed a line, Tristan. I didn't want to get involved in the Komodo War, but it appears I'll be dragged into its vortex anyway. I'm your enemy now. I won't show any mercy to your fellow Carnegie Group citizens."

"I don't expect you to hold back, Ves. We are both participants in a war that involves interests and hatreds that are greater than us. The soldiers in the trenches of the frontlines fight and die on the whims of politicians and leaders who doubtlessly sleep like babies at night."

Both of them understood the plight of a combatant caught up in a war that was completely outside of their control. They also understood that the participants in a war had to fulfill their duty even if they didn't like it. That was the nature of duty.

The tension between them didn't disappear because of those realizations. No matter how cordial and friendly they were to each other, they were enemies now.

Certainly, they still respected each other and didn't wish the other any harm, but their interests in the war did not sway because of their past friendship.

Tristan rooted for the Friday Coalition to smash the Hexadric Hegemony and bring the entire star sector in the sway of the saner of the two greater states!

Meanwhile, Ves wanted the Hexers to crush the Fridaymen and tear apart the Coalition by demolishing partner after partner until all six of them were broken!

As long as they maintained their hostile stances, their friendship was very hard to sustain!

"Tristan. Once the war is over, no matter which side wins, I hope we can be friends again." Ves softened a bit.

"Sure. Those are my thoughts exactly. Neither of us have a beef with each other, and I doubt we would personally do anything that affronts us personally. That is one of my goals for this meeting, in fact. I'm glad you are still open-minded enough to recognize that not every Fridayman is the same."

"I still want to dance over the grave of your state, though."

"Yet you don't wish our citizens any harm, right?"

Ves nodded. "Average citizens have nothing to do with my beef against your state. As you just stated, it's the bigwigs at the top who are responsible. My main goal is to make their lives difficult in any way I can. If any citizens suffer due to my actions, it's not intentional."

"My agency in this war is not as great as yours, so I won't bother to make such claims."

They briefly paused their conversation to finish their glasses of wine.

If Ves was a wine aficionado, then he would have appreciated its vintage even more. While Ves wasn't familiar with the bottle, it looked very classy and expensive.

Too bad Ves was more into nutrient packs than vintage wines.

"Who do you think will win the war?"

"Honestly? I have no idea." The Green Golem avatar shook his crystalline head. "I don't have nearly enough information to make a reasonable guess. There is too much going on. The battles at the front are only a part of the greater picture. Even though I always express my confidence in my own state to others, I don't have to pretend in front of you that I truly have no clue."

"Same. I'm not even a citizen of the Coalition or the Hegemony, so I have even less of an idea on how the two sides measure up in this conflict."

"The Hexers are certainly formidable. They are ferocious and united in their hatred of our state. Don't you think it would be a tragic picture if these crazy women are able to dominate an entire state? Every single resident in our star sector will fall under the sway of a man-hating regime who treats men like us as reckless children!"

"I don't care." Ves flatly replied. "I'll be gone soon anyway."

"That's.. convenient. No matter which side wins, you won't be there to suffer the repercussions."

"Look, I don't have any problem admitting that the Hexers are fairly awful compared to the Fridaymen. However, my personal feelings and circumstances are encouraging me to support the Hexers, so I do that without any other considerations."

"That's a selfish mindset."

"I never claimed to be anything else, Tristan."