

## Mech 2131

### *Chapter 2131 Touring the Star Cluster*

Once Master Willix and Jovy Armalon greeted their hosts, the procession began to move towards the secure workshop where the purpose of their visit rested.

Neither Master Willix reacted to the greeting party of Bright Warriors standing stoically on both sides.

Despite the huge and menacing weapons held by the mechs, none of the mechs showed any concern.

The Larkinson Clan would be crazy to lay a hand on the envoys of the MTA. Even if the Bright Warriors went out of control and attacked them out of the blue, their myriad of defenses could easily handle such attacks!

Rather, the various mech designers, engineers and other technical experts all reacted with varying degrees of shock, fascination or interest at the glows impacting their minds.

Despite walking in the middle of an entire company of Bright Warriors, none of the elite internal personnel of the MTA exhibited too many changes in their demeanor.

All of them were quite mentally resilient! Master Willix certainly hadn't brought anyone weak!

Most notably, Jovy Armalon observed the resplendent Bright Warrior with great interest! His glowing yellow eyes raked over the entire lengths of the four different configurations of the modular mech platforms as if he encountered a fascinating new toy!

"How intriguing." The young man with his neat, silver hair didn't even sway in the wind. "It is impressive how much you have accomplished with so little. I can hardly notice any flaws."

Gloriana beamed at that. "Though we had some help, it was quite a challenge to design this mech in the span of a couple months. The Bright Warrior design is just the precursor to our latest design."

"Mhmm." Jovy momentarily closed his glowing eyes. "So this is Mr. Larkinson's renowned 'glow'. Interesting. There are no components in the Bright Warrior design that can induce this effect. How can the Bright Warrior accomplish this feat?"

"What you're feeling comes from our proto-god, silly!" Gloriana replied as if it was no big deal. "Our Larkinson Clan is watched over by the Golden Cat. As long as you bear no ill will towards us and the clan, the Golden Cat will always welcome your presence!"

The mecher raised his eyebrow and turned to Ves, who nodded as naturally as possible.

By now, he had already worn his crazy hat!

"My girlfriend is correct. The Bright Warrior design is blessed by a proto-god that we have created for the purpose of protecting the Larkinson Clan. In a short moment, we will introduce you to another proto-god that we have summoned from the beyond. She is quite formidable, so be prepared."

"I cannot wait." Jovy smiled, though his expression turned a little strained.

Ves figured that Jovy had likely studied his record and had already heard from Master Willix about what the MTA knew about his design philosophy.

However, receiving second-hand knowledge about Ves' whacky design philosophy was different from hearing it direct from the source!

Jovy peered at Ves intensely as if trying to figure out whether he actually believed in the nonsense he just spouted!

Heh. Ves did not take any offense at Jovy's rude stare. With his current spiritual mask, he could match Gloriana in terms of craziness right now. There was no chink in his armor for Jovy and Master Willix to exploit!

Even so, Ves did not appreciate being scanned by Jovy's ocular implants. Their tell-tale glows made it very clear that the mecher sported an upgraded pair of eyes.

On account of Jovy's affiliation, Ves could only bear with the indignity without any word of complaint. He mentally patted himself on his back for smuggling all of his 'contraband' on the Scarlet Rose before sending the ship off. Who knew what Jovy would pick up if he still carried his gems and serum.

In fact, Ves wasn't even sure his pair of Synthra Umbra underwear was strong enough to block Jovy's powerful scanning methods!

Eventually, the staring had gotten so bad that Master Willix couldn't help but make a remark.

"Mr. Armalon, what did we tell you about your conduct?"

"The indigenous—"

"—are humans as well." Willix cut him off. "You have spent too much time in the confines of the MTA. If you have traveled farther and wider, you would have comported yourself in a different manner."

"My apologies, Master." Jovy sincerely bent. "I will endeavor to abide by your lesson."

As the group continued to walk, the mood between them remained cordial. Jovy stopped staring at Ves and instead began to look around the base. He stared curiously at the LMC mechs piloted by the Avatars, Sentinels and other forces and began to ask small questions about their designs.

Ves did not mind answering them. When he heard those questions, he quickly learned that Jovy was frighteningly intelligent. There was no doubt that he possessed a formidable implant! The amount of knowledge he carried rivaled that Ves. In fact, in many areas, the young MTA talent brought up knowledge that sounded completely unfamiliar!

Even so, both of them discovered that in terms of knowledge base, they both had their own strengths.

Jovy possessed a lot of knowledge about high technology and incredibly advanced applications, but he spread his attention too wide. His grasp on all of those fields weren't entirely solid, though he still mastered the basics to an excellent degree.

In contrast, Ves may not know or possess a deep understanding of exotic and powerful fields, but his Senior-level Skills imparted him with a rock-solid foundation!

This gave the both of them a good measure of respect towards each other. Ves had been afraid that the Journeyman that Master Willix brought along would be some snobbish elitist who wanted to rub his superiority in the faces of the so-called 'indigous people'.

While Gloriana continued to regale Master Willix with her exploits, the two male mech designers continued to probe each other.

In truth, Jovy was not that bad. He came across as a sheltered mech designer who spent most of his time in the familiar confines of his lab or the resplendent halls of the MTA.

At the very least, once Ves displayed his competence, Jovy no longer looked down on him as much!

"So where do you come from?" Ves casually asked.

"I'm a native of the Winged Serenade Star Sector. I was born at the sector headquarters and grew up there. After I have advanced to Journeyman, my parents encouraged me to go on a journey and experience the design and use of mechs in different star sectors."

That was hardly odd, especially for highly-promising mech designers like Jovie. He was just as old as Ves and Gloriana and had already proven that he was a solid Journeyman. This man's mech designs must certainly be formidable!

Usually, Journeymen traveled at least some point in their lives. It was just that few of them had the luxury to cross through multiple star sectors like Jovy. Either they were bound by existing commitments, or their company needed their presence too much for them to tour the galaxy without worry.

That was not a problem for the mech designers in the employ of the MTA. The powerful organization cultivated its own mech designers, and as the most formidable authority of the mech industry, the Association was well aware what Journeymen had to go through in order to unlock their full potential!

Up until now, Jovy had only visited a few star sectors, each time staying for a couple of months before moving on. Right now, he had just arrived at the Komodo Star Sector and coincidentally caught Master Willix' attention as she assembled a team to visit the Cinach System once again.

"What star sector interests you the most so far?" Ves curiously asked.

"Hmmm.." Jovy paused. "I would say the Vicious Mountain Star Sector has made the strongest impression on me. The way the Garlen Empire and the surrounding states have descended to.. barbarism.. is intriguing from a sociological standpoint. In practically every other part of human space, good leadership is often equated to intelligence and wisdom. Not so in Vicious Mountain. There, only a strong leader is qualified to lead the people, and I'm not talking about political strength."

"Yeah, Vicious Mountain is weird like that. We have heard plenty of stories here. It is rather to think that expert pilots and ace pilots of all people are put into a position of real power and leadership over a state!"

Jovy truly disliked what he had seen in that star sector! "It's a step backwards in our perspective. The progression of human civilization can be characterized as a gradual upwards progression from barbarism to civilization. Brute force can only strengthen you so much. It is not the caveman who wields the club, but the caveman who develops the bow and arrow that will reign supreme! In this advanced stage of the human race's history, I thought it was already very clear that the best thinkers of the people should be in charge. Putting the strongest brutes on the throne is a grossly-outdated tradition that should have never been brought back from the dead!"

The mecher couldn't contain himself and continued to express his contempt of Vicious Mountain. Though Ves did not necessarily disagree with the elite Journeyman's opinion, he wouldn't have put it in such an undiplomatic fashion.

If Jovy spoke like that in Vicious Mountain, then some local wouldn't hesitate to punch him in the face!

Ves coughed. "Vicious Mountain Star Sector indeed follows a different tradition. I think you MTA love seeing that, right?"

"At the very least, Vicious Mountain serves as a direct example where their path leads. The endless wars and competition for glory has left the star sector in a perpetually-unstable state."

As they talked, they soon reached the secure workshop. Once they passed through the entrance, the glow of the Superior Mother began to impact the MTA delegation.

The statue of the Superior Mother entered their sight first. The tall, marble-like statue possessed an indescribable allure to the other-wise stoic MTA specialists.

For some reason, ever since it had been struck by lightning, the statue acquired a mysterious charm. Though Ves didn't think much of it, the fact that the elite MTA envoys all halted in their tracks was rather alarming!

"So this is the statue that has made such a stir in the local news." Master Willix commented with interest. "It bears your glow, yet it is not a mech."

Ves smiled. He was already prepared for this question.

"How do you think our proto-gods are born? They are fueled by worship! The Superior Mother is my greatest divinity to date! With the confluence of 6 proto-gods, 66 formidable Swordmaidens, 666 Penitent Sisters, 6,666 coffins, 66,666 local men and 666,666 remains of sandmen, I have managed to bring the ultimate Hexer deity to life!"

Jovy directed an incredibly odd look at Ves. Before, they talked normally, not revealing much that was out of the ordinary.

For Ves to suddenly turn into a raving fanatic was too much of a shock to the inexperienced Journeyman!

Master Willix looked unfazed but put a hand on Jovy's shoulder. The younger mech designer's expression quickly schooled back to normal.

Obviously, the two had silently communicated with each other through their implants. Whatever the Master said, Jovy no longer looked like he wanted to open his mouth and challenge the absurdities he heard.

Soon enough, the delegation moved on and finally reached the mech that they had been waiting for. The Little Angel finally graced their sight.

A number of envoys including Jovy sighed and gazed upon the masterwork mech with admiration.

"We can already draft the masterwork certificates." Jovy said as he meticulously studied the superb craftsmanship of the Blessed Squire copy. "There is no doubt that it's a masterwork!"

If Jovy was already this bad, then Master Willix and the women in her entourage were worse!

"This mech... this mech is extraordinary!"

It didn't take long for Master Willix to leave the group and ascend into the air in order to study the mech up close!

Even her formidable self-control had lost against her urge to study the Little Angel!

*Chapter 2132 Quick Deal*

Moira Willix was a rational mech designer.

Moira Willix was a Master Mech Designer.

Moira Willix was a senior figure in the MTA.

Yet amidst all of these extraordinary identities, she was also a woman!

Right now, Master Willix hardly exhibited the reserve and majesty of an individual of her high stature. Instead, as soon as she caught a good glimpse of the Little Angel, she seemingly devolved into a drooling fangirl who just came face to face with her idol!

The other women of the delegation weren't much better off! Since their superior already raced towards the compelling masterwork mech, they also decided to zip forward!

While the men such as Jovy and the rest weren't as affected, a masterwork mech was still a masterwork mech.

Even the mechers rarely encountered them on a frequent basis!

Jovy shook as if he tried to maintain at least some grasp of his decorum. "I thought that the stories regarding your masterwork mechs were overblown, Mr. Larkinson. It seems those stories are mistaken. This mech's astonishing glow is the least remarkable about this mech. What exquisite craftsmanship!"

He finally couldn't take it any longer. He shrugged off Ves and joined his compatriots in studying the mech from all sides.

It was as if a swarm of flies had suddenly appeared around the Little Angel. The sight was absurd to Ves because all of those 'flies' actually represented the current and future elite of the MTA!

None of their identities were average. As part of the core personnel of the MTA, Master Willix, Jovy and the rest were exposed to incredibly potent first-class multipurpose mechs on a daily basis.

Yet right now, a copy of a rather unexceptional second-class mech had attracted their complete attention!

"Hihi, do you see, Ves? Even the MTA adores my baby!"

Though Gloriana was just as obsessed about her masterwork mech as Master Willix if not more, she already had her fill. After a week of studying her best creation from top to bottom, she no longer felt the urge to stay with her mech every second of the day.

The same did not apply to those who encountered the Little Angel for the first time. Mech designers and technical specialists all possessed at least some cognition on the extraordinary nature of masterworks, and no one knew more about them than the MTA!

As Ves observed Master Willix and the others going crazy, he understood that the Little Angel was considerably more impressive to them than the Quint!

He suspected that it wasn't just the fact that the Little Angel was a more powerful mech that intrigued these great figures.

Instead, from a craftsmanship viewpoint, the Little Angel was considerably more refined. Even though it needed a gem to push it over the masterwork threshold, much of its quality had already been elevated by Gloriana when she entered into her inspired state.

This was still the main source of the Little Angel's strength! Even without the Mother's Love gem, the mech would have still been able to impress the likes of Seniors and Masters for their excellent construction and near-perfect implementation.

All of them were essentially attracted by Gloriana's excellent results, and the woman responsible was eating it all up. The grin on her face only exposed a hint of her pride and satisfaction!

"Even the MTA knows how to appreciate my blessed work!" She boasted.

"That they do."

For some time, the MTA dropped every other matter in order to indulge in their need to study every single exceptional quality about the Little Angel.

Though the mech's maternal glow attracted a lot of fascination from those who never came in touch with glows before, Master Willix did not express that much interest in it this time. She hardly ever called up Ves to ask any questions about his specialty.

It would have been pointless anyway. The few times she asked about the Superior Mother, Ves easily spun some nonsense about proto-gods and divinities.

Fortunately, these questions came few and far in between, and the Master Mech Designer eventually waved Ves away entirely.

This time, the Master was much more interested about the many spontaneous solutions that Gloriana came up with when she fabricated the mech.

For her part, Gloriana ecstatically explained her thoughts and described her methods as best as possible. She truly felt honored that a Master was interested in her process. The attention of such a great authority figure validated her self esteem!

Ves restrained his urge to palm his face. She was revealing too much knowledge! Much of the insights she spouted directly related to her trade secrets.

Even though it was difficult for someone with a different mindset to replicate her design philosophy, Master Willix had already shown off the capability to simulate Gloriana's specialty to a frightening degree. There was no reason to make it worse!

However, Ves knew that he had no way of convincing Gloriana to shut up. She chased after excellence, and wanted to be acknowledged for her efforts.

Before, when she lived in the Hegemony, she could show off all of her efforts to her fellow classmates, friends and colleagues. She could invite dozens, if not hundreds of mech designers at her level to exhibit her work.

That wasn't possible anymore!

Ever since she hooked up with Ves, she no longer interacted with any peer in person except for Ves. Sure, she still maintained contact with her old friends on Commbook, but she spent increasingly less time there. The years without personal contact had cooled her relations with her friends and former classmates.

Therefore, she keenly pounced on the opportunity to interact with other equal or superior mech designers. Not everyone enjoyed the privilege to showcase their work to one of the best Masters around!

For her part, Master Willix reciprocated Gloriana's openness by giving out insights in return. At her level, Willix easily pointed out shortcomings and other issues of concern. She even illuminated a path to solving them, thereby saving the younger mech designer considerable effort!

Ves wondered if Master Willix would be able to guide his progression as well if he spilled some of his beans.

He immediately crossed this possibility off his mind. His design philosophy belonged to him and him alone! There was no way he was going to let the MTA get its grubby hands on his core secrets just because he wanted some tutoring from a Master!

His specialization was different from that of Gloriana. Hers was in a much more familiar territory to the MTA. No matter what, the Association accumulated an immense understanding of all of the technical aspects of mechs.

As for their research on spirituality, Ves did not know how much the MTA actually understood about it. Whatever the case, spirituality or 'psionic power' was not common knowledge.

At the very least, Ves had not encountered a mecher who displayed any exceptional prowess in terms of spirituality!

Therefore, he was pretty certain that he held the upper hand in this regard. He would be much less reluctant to hang on to his secrets if the MTA essentially already made a lot of strides in this field.

Several hours passed by. As the Little Angel still worked its magic on Master Willix, Ves eventually left the workshop.

His presence wasn't needed anymore. This suited him fine, as Ves did not wish to interact with the MTA delegation at all to begin with. As far as he was concerned, Gloriana could keep them company for as long as she wanted!

He met up with his assistant Gavin at his office. He sat down behind his desk and pressed his head against his hand.

"The Ubiquitous Force and Master Willix arrived at Cinach once again." He noted. "I'm sure that the entire mech industry is abuzz again. How much do the public know?"

"Remarkably little, boss. The Blessed Squire design is still under wraps and whatever you cooked up in that isolated workshop is still a mystery. It's just..."

"The fact that Master Willix visited me for the third time in just a year is indicative that we have accomplished something remarkable again." Ves ruefully smiled.

The movements of the MTA acted like a giant signal flare over Ves and Gloriana. There was no way to pretend that nothing had happened in the Larkinson Clan!

Gavin attempted to placate him. "It's not that bad, boss. The public is only aware that something is up. The previous two visits related to the emergence of a masterwork and

a mech with a very menacing glow. No one knows which of the two has taken place again. Perhaps something else has led to this response."

The worst-case scenario hadn't taken place. The Blessed Squire design still remained confidential, and the MTA at least respected that. This was hardly unusual. I was well-known that even if the MTA wanted to take a peek at classific design projects, none of their personnel leaked out the juicy details.

How could states, companies and mech designers still trust the MTA when it carelessly exposed strategic information that was critical to their power plays?

Several days went by. Though Ves still acted as if he was walking on coals, his worries eventually subsided a bit. Even with the Ubiquitous Force and the MTA delegation in his base, the preparations to depart still proceeded on schedule.

Ves stopped visiting the secure workshop, and Master Willix didn't demand his presence. He thought that the MTA delegation would spend the rest of the week drooling over the Little Angel before departing.

However, two developments took place that forced him to meet with the MTA envoys again.

First was the matter of ownership. It turned out that the MTA, or more precisely, wanted the Little Angel.

When Ves entered the secure workshop, he surprisingly noticed that Calabast had come as well.

"I'm negotiating on behalf of DIVA." His strategic partner explained to him. "Technically, the Little Angel belongs to the agency. However, any deal will still involve you and Gloriana. As the principal creators of the masterwork mech, the MTA still intends to reward the two of you even if you have already passed over the mech."

Ves expected the negotiations to proceed in a contentious fashion. After all, the Little Angel was not only a masterwork mech, but also possessed a powerful glow that had a very strong on Hexers. It was an incredibly powerful influencing tool! DIVA could sway all manner of powerful Hexers by taking advantage of the Little Angel's exceptional properties.

However, the talks weren't as tense as he predicted.

"The MTA wants this mech, and we do not take no for an answer." Master Willix plainly insisted.

Though she didn't raise her voice or revealed any fangs, her words already conveyed the dominance of the MTA.

There was no way that DIVA or the Hexadric Hegemony could refuse her offer!

Yet Calabast maintained her composure in front of the Master. "You desire the Little Angel. DIVA is not unwilling to transfer it to the MTA, but it still has a use for the mech. You do not need the Little Angel urgently, do you? How about you allow the Hegemony to possess the masterwork mech for a year before handing it over to your Association?"

That was a very clever suggestion. Master Willix did not delay in her response. "Acceptable. In one standard year, DIVA or anyone who possesses the Little Angel must surrender the masterwork mech to us or face the consequences."

Both of them shook their hands. Ves widened his eyes throughout the brief exchange. That was fast!

Obviously, Calabast recognized that while Master Willix or the MTA badly wanted the Little Angel for some reason, it didn't matter if they had to wait a bit. As long as DIVA was able to utilize the Little Angel's exceptional allure towards women and Hexers for a year, that was already enough!

Perhaps the most pleasant surprise was that the MTA promised to award Ves and Gloriana with 500,000 MTA merits each!

Since the MTA received the masterwork in the end, Master Willix was not shy about apportioning the original reward for such a submission to the mech designers responsible for creating the Little Angel.

Ves already earned over 1 million MTA merits over the span of a single year! The same applied to Gloriana. Both of them had surpassed countless Journeymen in that regard.

Just as Ves thought that he could go on his way, Jovy Armalon suddenly appeared in front of his face!

"Mr. Larkinson." Jovy smiled as his glowing yellow eyes peered into his own. "I've missed your company for a few days. After studying your handiwork in extensive detail, I have become more and more fascinated by your results."

"Thank you." Ves said.

"I want to compare my design ability against yours. Would you be interested in competing against me in a design duel?"

What? A design duel? Ves looked at Jovy with an odd expression.

*Chapter 2133 Darkbreak Module*

Jovy Armalon challenged Ves to a design duel out of the blue.

The silver-haired Journeyman hadn't made any noise since he arrived with Master Willix. Yet all of a sudden, he wanted to compare against Ves in design ability!

The request came so sudden that Ves momentarily paused.

"Why?" He asked in confusion.

"Because I'm impressed with your work!" He shouted with energy! "Among second-class mechs, I have never witnessed a mech like the Little Angel! Certainly, I would never be able to design a mech that comes close to what it offers, and that is not something I see every day."

"That's not a reason to challenge me. You're an MTA mech designer. I'm just a local mech designer. Our titles may be the same, but our realms are worlds apart."

This wasn't the first time Jovy challenged an indigenous mech designer. Many of them quaked with fear at the thought of challenging someone who had been nurtured by the MTA. Even Seniors with decades of seniority doubted whether they could measure up against a mech designer who had been nurtured by the holy land of mechs!

Jovy smiled and tried to adopt a friendlier posture. "Our specialties and our mechs are vastly different. While it is true that you won't be able to match me when it comes to designing first-class mechs, the same does not necessarily apply when we fight on your terms. I have toured several star sectors already and met with all manner of mech designers, from eager Apprentices to stately Masters. When it comes to lesser mechs, I believe there is a lot of credence in the rumor that you are one of the best Journeymen in the star cluster. You are worthy to battle me in the design arena."

He made it sound as if Ves should feel privileged to lock horns with someone as his august self!

Though Ves was very confident in his design ability, to say that he was truly one of the best Journeymen was a stretch. In terms of foundational Skills, he knew he already exceeded the ordinary levels of his peers.

However, when it came to his specialization, he hadn't actually made that much progress. As powerful as it was, Ves had mostly been taking advantage of external design spirits.

When it came to empowering his mechs by relying on his own, he still had much to go! Until he made some breakthroughs in this area, he did not dare to claim that he ranked among the top of Journeymen.

Perhaps he truly had the capital to make such a statement if he limited his comparison to his generation, but Ves knew that there were lots of old dogs who had developed all kinds of confounding abilities!

Ves crossed his arms. "Mr. Armalon, your flattery is just talk. How can those rumors be true? The galaxy is vast and holds all manner of absurd mech designers. Even in this small star sector, I still do not dare to claim to be the best when there are hundreds, if not thousands of mech designers who have been personally nurtured by the esteemed Masters of the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony. If you seek an actual challenge, you should go to them instead!"

"Oh, I plan to do so, but right now I'm at your doorstep. I have heard that you take a lot of pride in your work. I also heard you like to challenge yourself. You're not the first mech designer who thinks someone from the MTA like myself can't be overcome, but don't sell yourself short. I have dueled many local mech designers and they have bested me numerous times when I play their own game. I'm more than willing for you to choose the terms of the duel as long as they are fair. What do you say? Are you willing to defend your pride?"

Though Ves admittedly felt riled up as soon as his pride was on the line, he quickly reminded himself of his many responsibilities.

He was no longer a young and eager Apprentice eager to make himself stand out from the mech industry. He had already achieved this objective.

"I have already proven myself as a mech designer. My mech company sells more than 50,000 Doom Guards per month, and I have already sold over 2 million Desolate Soldiers. I am already past the stage where I need to make a name for myself by winning duels. Instead of wasting time, I can spend my time on preparing for my upcoming expedition to the Nyxian Gap. Now that is a real challenge. Do you dare to come with me to the Nyxian Gap and fight all manner of pirates while evading hazardous zones?"

Jovy blinked at that. Even he heard about the Nyxian Gap and how it swallowed many of his colleagues. Even if they traveled on the best ships they could access and fielded a large number of formidable first-class multipurpose mechs, as long as they traveled deep enough, they never appeared again!

This fact frightened the Big Two to no end! If not for the remoteness of the Nyxian Gap, the MTA and the CFA would have invested serious resources to decipher and dismantle the hazards of this warped region of space!

"If pride is not enough, what about money?" Jovy offered. "Let's make a bet. If you win, I'll transfer 1,000 MTA credits!"

"And what if I lose?"

"You don't have to pay me anything! It won't cost you anything if you lose, but if you happen to win, "

Ves rapidly performed some mental calculations. A single MTA credit was almost equivalent to the value of a Blessed Squire. A thousand MTA credits used to be an unimaginably huge amount of money to him, but he was not the little Novice and Apprentice of before.

With his LMC spreading its reach over half the star sector, earning a thousand MTA credits was simply a matter of selling enough profitable mechs!

That said, 1,000 MTA merits roughly amounted to 191 billion hex credits, which was around a sixth of the cost of his factory ship!

Whether he intended to spend the money on acquiring new combat carriers or ordering additional upgrades for his factory ship, Ves would not say no to earning this hefty sum!

However... Jovy was an internal mech designer of the MTA. This duel reeked of a trap. While it was true that Ves did not shy away from a challenge, the rewards had to be proportionate to the risks!

It didn't matter if Jovy dangled 1,000 MTA credits or 1 million MTA credits in front of his face. There was no way that this elite mech designer was that easy to beat!

Ves shook his head and turned around. "I'm a very busy mech designer. Credits don't interest me. If you offered me merits, then I might change my mind. If not, then I bid you a good day."

"Hey, wait a minute Larkinson! If 1,000 MTA credits is not enough, what about 2,000? No? 3,000! 4,000! 5,000!"

No matter how much Jovy raised the stakes, Ves remained unmoved.

"I'll give you half even if you lose! That way, you won't come away empty-handed regardless of the outcome!"

Though Ves slowed his steps, he continued to walk away, causing Jovy to become increasingly more distraught.

Hardly any mech designer refused when he issued his challenge. Even if the odds of winning were slim, the other mech designers were too awed by his identity to reject his request.

Even though everyone that Jovy dueled knew that he was using them as a whetstone to polish his design skills, they were eager to maintain good relations with the MTA. As long as they earned his respect, they always had the opportunity to become acquaintances and remain in contact!

Making such a connection was extremely valuable to these local mech designers!

The elite talent never met someone like Ves who apparently couldn't care less about his potential friendship.

Of course, much of that had to do with his determination to minimize his entanglement with the MTA. Why should he possibly pursue a friendship with someone who might as well be more discerning and obnoxious than Master Willix in the future?

Seeing that Ves remained unmoved even after Jovy offered a sum of money that would make any indigenous mech designer wild, he began to draw out something else from his formidable arsenal!

"What about a piece of tech? I can offer you an upgraded shield generator that is better than the ones you have! If you want knowledge, I can offer you a copy of my personal textbooks!"

Though an additional shield generator or an MTA-issued textbook wasn't as attractive to Ves as Jovy thought, the offers nonetheless headed in the right direction.

Ves halted his departure and turned around. "Do you have any tech that can allow me to maintain a stable connection to the galactic net while I'm inside the Nyxian Gap?"

"Uhm... I don't think so." Jovy suddenly halted. "I'm not authorized to put forth such a device. Master Willix, do we have this tech?"

The Master nodded. "The local branches of the MTA have developed a specialized quantum entanglement node that is able to resist the interference produced by the space warping of the Nyxian Gap. However, it is not omnipotent. It only ensures that you can maintain a stabler connection while you are in the periphery of the Gap. As for venturing deeper, the strengthened connection will rapidly diminish. It is better than a standard quantum entanglement node, but not by much."

Ves still looked very interested at this piece of tech! "If you put this specialized node up as a reward for my participation, I will accept your duel!"

"I cannot. It's not within my rights to release restricted tech to a local such as you." Jovy turned to Master Willix. "Unless..."

The Master furrowed her brow. This was a problematic demand. However, she possessed a considerable amount of authority and leeway within the local branch.

"I can lend out the Darkbreak module, which is what the specialized quantum entanglement node is called." She eventually decided. "Once Mr. Larkinson is done, he must return the Darkbreak module to our hands. This is the extent of what I can offer."

That was enough for Jovy! "There! Will you accept my duel now? If you win, you will get 5,000 MTA credits and the opportunity to borrow our Darkbreak module! If you lose, I'll give you half the credits no matter your performance."

Even Gloriana couldn't contain herself any longer. "You should accept, Ves!"

"I don't know..." Ves looked warily at Jovy. "It's all well and good to dangle the Darkbreak module in front of my face, but I want to borrow it regardless of the outcome of the duel. I'm not confident I can win against you! Those credits you offer as a consolation prize is not relevant to my upcoming expedition."

Jovy frowned again. "I want to fight you at your best. If you already stand to gain the most valuable reward when you lose, how can this duel be meaningful?"

They were stuck in a dilemma. It dawned on everyone that Ves was driving a hard bargain. He wanted to borrow the Darkbreak module regardless whether he won or lost. Jovy was reluctant to agree with this demand because he suspected that his dueling opponent would lack the motivation to muster up his full strength.

To be fair, Jovy was right to be concerned. Already, Ves was thinking of scamming this fellow by pretending to do his best. After all, there was hardly any reason for him to go all out when he already secured what he truly wanted!

The situation grew increasingly awkward. Even Master Willix began to display some irritation.

Ves was too obstinate! Hardly anyone dared to stymie someone from the MTA to the extent of extorting an exclusive piece of tech! Was he asking for more?

#### *Chapter 2134 Setting Terms*

There were multiple reasons why Ves brazenly put up so much resistance to participating in a design duel.

First, he genuinely lacked the confidence to win against an MTA elite like Jovy.

Aside from the MTA mech designer's excellent upbringing and access to some of the best resources in human hands, Ves simply knew too little about his opponent!

The same did not apply to Jovy. The man not only accessed Ves' record, but also spent days on the Little Angel!

Though the fabrication of the masterwork mech was mostly Gloriana's work, Ves had been a lot more involved in its design. A mech designer as competent as Jovy should have been able to figure out most of Ves' strengths and weaknesses with that much examination!

Second, he genuinely thought it was a waste of time. Winning the Komodo War, designing more best-selling mechs and earning millions of MTA merits mattered more to him than defending his pride or comparing himself against a true peer in mech design.

The only reason he halted his steps in the first place was because Jovy and Master Willix finally added something attractive in the pot. Obtaining the so-called Darkbreak module, even temporarily, would definitely help him out in his upcoming mission!

However, this piece of tech came directly from the MTA, and Ves did not trust that any data sent through this module would remain secret.

Third, he respected the MTA's power, but not its friendship.

Almost every other mech designer in the galaxy viewed the MTA with rose-tinted glasses. It was hard not to. Not only did it single-handedly prop up the mech industry to the point that it had become the most flourishing sector in the galaxy, the MTA also offered many opportunities that weren't ordinarily available.

Without the MTA, the Age of Mechs would have never succeeded the Age of Conquest!

Without the MTA, trillions of mech designers would have never been able to compete in a much less regulated mech market!

Without the MTA, their profession would have never been as honored and lucrative as today!

While Ves acknowledged all of the good that the MTA had done, it still had a lot of skeletons in the closet. Ves feared that his own skeleton would be added to the Association's closet if he came too close!

All of these reasons meant that Ves didn't feel very enthused about accepting this challenge.

However, that did not mean he was opposed to it entirely. Now that the pot had been sweetened a bit, Ves wanted to test how hard he could drive this bargain.

He continued to stand still as he waited for Jovy and Master Willix to adjust the stakes again.

As soon as Master Willix intervened in Jovy's private challenge, Ves began to suspect that she may have a hand in it as well. Was she trying to induce him to design and build a mech in front of her eyes?

This caused him to grow a bit more vigilant. Ves was deeply afraid that Master Willix might glean some more clues if she observed him putting his full effort into making a competition mech!

On the other hand, if Master Willix encouraged Jovy to issue his challenge, then that meant that Ves could milk them even further. Even though he didn't want to show off his design methods to the MTA, he was still fairly confident that he would successfully be able to confound Master Willix!

As long as this premise held, he was not as opposed to accepting the duel. He just wanted to make the most out of his bargaining power and see if he could extract more concessions. If they wanted him to duel Jovy so badly, then they better bring out more from MTA's immense wealth!

Just as Jovy was about to open his mouth, Master Willix raised her hand and stepped forward. Her irritation had grown deeper.

"This is quite enough, Mr. Larkinson. If you win, you will keep the Darkbreak module. If you lose, you can only borrow it. This is the extent of what the stakes will be. Before you think that is not enough, let me inform you that the Darkbreak module can maintain a secure connection in other anomalous regions, not just the Nyxian Gap. While it is relatively rare to encounter this situation in the Komodo Star Sector, there are several ways to hinder the operation of quantum entanglement nodes. States and powerful organizations in the more prosperous parts of human space regularly make use of them to hinder their foes. The Darkbreak module can defeat these measures to an extent."

It sounded as if Master Willix knew exactly what Ves intended and plainly wanted to forestall his attempt! Ves tried his best not to show his displeasure.

"I will still get the credits as well, right?"

Master Willix didn't even deign to answer that question. 5,000 MTA credits was peanuts to her, but that did not mean that she was willing to throw more money at Ves in order to reward his scoundrel-like behavior!

A very powerful aura began to emanate from the Master. Ves, Jovy, Gloriana and the other MTA personnel abruptly felt a formidable pressure on their minds.

Ves looked incredibly serious as his exceptional spiritual perception saw more! The limped and hidden spirituality in the Master's mind had roused itself. Though she ordinarily suppressed it, now she was actively stimulating some of her formidable strength as a mech designer who realized her design philosophy!

Her strength dwarfed almost anything he had seen before! Perhaps not even Qilanxo could hold a candle against the might that this powerful Master ordinarily locked within her mind!

Then, the pressure disappeared. People sighed in relief as Master Willix returned to her normal demeanor as an approachable mech designer.

"Please set the terms of the design duel, Mr. Larkinson. Choose any time limit, mech class and mech type. No handicaps and no ridiculous demands. Let us keep the design duel fair but challenging for you both. This is not only a contest of skills, but also an opportunity to learn from each other."

"Uhm, okay. Let me think."

This time, Ves didn't dare to act insolent. Perhaps he misjudged how many antics Master Willix was willing to tolerate. He had been lulled by her friendly overtures and generous actions. This caused her to remind him of her immense power and authority!

The way she phrased her words made it seem that it was already a given that Ves accepted the duel. He could not afford to say anything that contradicted her command, which meant he could not extricate himself from this challenge any longer!

When Ves gazed at Jovy, he only saw eagerness and lust for victory.

The MTA mech designer was very confident in himself, and for good reason!

This caused Ves to feel more troubled. Though he already stood to gain a decent reward in the event of a loss, he wanted to keep the Darkbreak module!

In the future, his enemies would only grow more formidable. Once he encountered a difficult situation where his connection to the galactic net became frayed, having a more robust means of communication might be a lifesaver!

Naturally, any signal passed through the Darkbreak module would also fall into the hands of the MTA, but that was already the case with regular quantum entanglement nodes. Almost everyone sensible in the galaxy already knew that the Comm Consortium was a puppet of the Big Two!

Therefore, Ves had plenty of motivation now to do his best to win this duel.

Since Jovy and Master Willix generously allowed him to set the terms, he might as well see if he could push his luck in this area as well!

"Let's design a third-class mech." He stated.

Predictably, Jovy did not look pleased with this suggestion. "Third-class mechs are.. too basic to express our strengths. You are already a second-class mech designer, are you not? The Little Angel there has shown me that you have already reached a satisfactory standard."

"Most of that is Gloriana's handiwork." Ves partially lied. "She not only started off as a second-class mech designer, but was also responsible for solving many difficult problems! Even if I'm qualified to design second-class mechs, I have just surpassed the

threshold. I'm still a third-class mech designer at heart. I've designed more than a dozen third-class mechs but only a single Blessed Squire design. Why should I cede my personal high ground just because you think that cheap mechs are worthless?"

"That's not what I meant, Mr. Larkinson! I am just.. not.. used.. to.. designing.. lower-specced.. mechs..."

Ves turned to Master Willix, who in turn looked displeased at Jovy.

"Mechs are mechs regardless of their quality or power. Third-class mechs are the most ubiquitous machines in the galaxy. They play an indispensable role to many states and people. Mr. Armalon, if you wish to master mechs to a higher degree, then you need to set aside some of your preconceived notions and step out of your comfort zone. Do not forget the purpose of your tour."

With the admonishment from the Master, it was Jovy's turn to acquiesce.

"Very well." He reluctantly responded. "I accept this term."

Throughout this brief exchange, Ves recognized that his guess was right. This wealthy, privileged mech designer was so used to designing powerful mechs that his experience in designing lesser mechs was limited!

Since that was the case, Ves should continue to pounce

"Even third-class mechs can be expensive to many many others. In the mech markets that I am still engaged in, pricing and cost efficiency are some of the most important criteria to many customers. It has always been a challenge to design a mech that is expected to do much while still remaining affordable. For this reason, let us set the budget at 600,000 hex credits."

"What?! That is an unbearably low sum! You can hardly design anything with such a miniscule budget!"

Ves remained stubborn, however. "My Desolate Soldier is the most successful product of my mech company to date, and its price is not that far off from this amount. Are you saying you can't design a mech that can sell just as well with the same budget?"

"No!"

As an MTA mech designer, Jovy did not allow himself to admit his inferiority in this area! At the very least, he should put up a fight! He briefly glanced at Master Willix in order to gauge her stance.

Her expression remained impassive, which meant that there was not big issue with this term!

"Very well." Jovy sighed. "I will agree to your budget."

"That's great. As for the mech type, let's go for a landbound striker mech. It's a simple design and one that we can finish in a very short amount of time."

"A striker mech?! That's too simple!"

"It's because they are so simple that they make for a good choice in a pure design duel." Ves retorted with confidence. "Both of us are going to put our competition mechs to the test by allowing our own mech pilots to compete, right? Any MTA mech pilot can easily overpower my own mech pilots in skill, training and reflexes."

"Letting actual people pilot our mechs is not the only option. The MTA has developed many AI mech pilots that can be used for these occasions. Both of our mechs will be piloted by the exact same AI mech pilot to ensure total fairness."

Ves shook his head. "No can do. My design philosophy is metaphysical man-machine symbiosis. That means my strengths are centered around influencing and empowering mech pilots when they pilot my mechs. What can I do with a lifeless, unfeeling bot? A duel involving AI mech pilots will essentially negate my greatest selling point, which means you won't be facing me at my full strength!"

"Mr. Larkinson is correct." Master Willix interjected again. "His demand to test your competition mechs with human mech pilots is reasonable, and so is his assumption that our mech pilots are superior in every way. Choosing a mech type with relatively little skill expression such as striker mechs is a good way to lessen this unavoidable disparity."

Of course, they could have assigned mech pilots from the same group to pilot both mechs. However, it was very hard to ensure whether an MTA mech pilot would do his best in a mech designed by Ves. Since he already suggested this term, he had made his own stance clear.

"Very well, but that is it." Jovy stated with a firm voice. "In order to keep this duel equitable, this is the extent you can set the rules. For the subsequent terms, we must both agree to them. Is that acceptable?"

"That's fine!"

Ves grinned. He already secured enough advantages!

*Chapter 2135 Mind Crash*

Ves did not object to the fact that Jovy stood a better chance of winning because he would be able to field his competition mech with a superior MTA mech pilot.

He had already made Jovy uncomfortable enough with the shamelessness of his previous terms.

Perhaps not even Master Willix imagined that Ves would take so much advantage of his opportunity to set the terms!

If he went any further, he might push Jovy's forbearance to the point of snapping!

Fortunately, Ves did not make Jovy's life more difficult from this point. Both of them quickly agreed on the remaining terms.

First, the tech they were allowed to implement in their mechs would be limited to publicly-available third-class components. Anything was allowed as long as they stayed within their budgets.

One caveat was that the materials used in the mech design had to be sourced from Cinach VI. This meant that Jovy wasn't allowed to incorporate some obscure, unknown exotic that was only known to the MTA and a select few people!

Second, they had 3 days to design their respective mechs. Both of them had to design their mechs from standard components, which meant that they were not allowed to save time by making use of prefab parts that were commonly used in other design duels.

Both of them weren't Apprentices anymore, which meant that neither Ves nor Jovy needed any training wheels to whip up a functional mech design in 72 hours!

Previously, Ves designed competition mechs where he had access to a catalog of complete legs, arms and other large systems. This saved a lot of time, but gave the mech designer much less room to showcase his comprehensive design ability.

Third, when it came to fabricating their competition mechs, Jovy opted to materialize his mech with the help of the Ubiquitous Force in a matter of minutes. He was used to relying on materialization technology to make his mechs and disliked resorting to cruder production methods.

This was something that Ves vehemently disagreed upon. "My design philosophy is based around life! How can there be any life in a mech that is assembled like a clone?"

In the end, Jovy agreed to give Ves two days to fabricate his mech in the workshop they were in right now. While two days was cutting it a bit short, with his formidable Assembly Skills, he was sure he could get it done in time, especially when it came to a low-budget mech!

Amusingly enough, Master Willix admonished Jovy yet again.

"I will allow you to stick to your chosen method this time, as Mr. Larkinson is evidently the first mech designer you have met who has refused to make use of materialization technology. He has a good reason to do so. It is no surprise that he has become a masterwork mech designer at such a young age. For your own good, I hope there won't be a next time."

"I understand." Jovy bowed. "I will endeavor to practice the traditional methods of producing mechs after this duel. I will make a masterwork mech too one day!"

Materialization technology was very convenient. As long as a mech designer had access to a materializer with a sufficient supply of materials, they could simply upload their design and press a button. A brand-new mech that conformed exactly to the design schematics would soon appear without any further need to intervene!

It seemed that Jovy was too spoiled and had become so dependent on materialization technology that he wasn't confident that he could beat Ves in traditional fabrication.

He was right to think so. Publicly, Ves had created two masterwork mechs. Secretly, he actually created three!

Regardless of the exact number, his affinity for mechs had definitely risen! It already took a formidable mastery in fabricating mechs in order to make masterwork mechs possible. As Ves actually succeeded multiple times, his fluency, intuition and judgement in this area had grown so formidable that even an elite MTA Journeyman like Jovy lost his confidence!

Arguably, materialization was still the superior option in most cases. Yet there were certain mech designers like Ves or Gloriana who lost far more than they could gain by taking the human element out of the equation!

Aside from these terms, they also chose their mech pilots who would act as their champions beforehand.

The selection was only limited to regular mech pilots, so Ves chose Joshua Larkinson without any hesitation.

As for Jovy, he picked a random MTA mech pilot assigned to the Ubiquitous Force. To make it as fair as possible, the pilot he chose was just as young as Joshua.

A final term that Ves had specifically requested was to deactivate the use of implants. While Ves was very pleased with his implant, it was still an outdated storage model from the CFA.

There was no way that Jovy possessed an inferior implant! Even a modest MTA implant provided an immense boost to his design abilities!

Ves might as well roll over and give up straight away if both of them were allowed to make use of their implants.

Although the request sounded extreme considering that both of them relied a lot on their implants, this was not actually a strange request.

If mech designers were allowed to make full use of their cranial implants in mech duels, then most competitions would essentially be determined by who possessed the better one! The greater the difference, the more the results would be skewed in this fashion!

Jovy assumed that Ves possessed a bog-standard second-class cranial implant. If that was the case, then the disparity was simply too big!

"Okay." Jovy nodded in agreement. "The Ubiquitous Force already has implant limiters on hand."

These were all the terms for their design duel. Only at this point were both of them prepared to compete against each other!

They shook hands.

"Good luck, Mr. Larkinson. Even if you fight me at a terrain of your choosing, you have already lost. My skills aren't limited to high-class mechs."

Ves did not think that Jovy was overestimating his chances. Regardless how uncomfortable he felt, a good mech designer was still a good mech designer no matter the circumstances!

"Be prepared for a good fight."

That was all he said. At this point, Ves still did not have enough confidence to win. However, as long as there was a chance, he might as well do his best!

The competition started in a couple of minutes.

In order to level the playing field, any interfering factors had to be moved away. A group of bots dispatched from the Ubiquitous Force lifted the Statue of the Superior Mother and moved it away. Another group of bots covered the Blessed Squire in an opaque field and moved it away as well.

The subordinates under Master Willix would continue to inspect the masterwork mech inside the MTA frigate and complete the certification process by the end of the duel.

The bots also delivered the so-called implant limiters.

Gloriana approached Ves as he sat on a chair held the thumb-sized gadget and placed it on his head.

"Ack!"

Soon enough, Ves immediately let out a gasp and felt as if he lost half his mind!

The partial digitization that he had grown familiar with abruptly disappeared. The transition was so sudden that Ves momentarily felt his normal thought operations crashing into dead ends.

Familiar routines and commands that relied on the functionality of his Archimedes Rubal no longer worked!

"So this is why they gave me an hour of preparation time." He muttered as he rubbed the side of his head.

Gloriana sat next to him and pressed up to the side of his body. Her airy scent immediately filled his nose, which distracted him from his disordered mind.

"This is your first time wearing an implant limiter, so you must be feeling awful right now."

"I feel as if someone literally scooped half of my brain!"

"It's okay. Just don't think too much and calm yourself. Let me guide you. It's easy to return to normal once you develop a specific mental routine."

She expertly guided him to rebuild his own thought patterns that he used to depend on before he received his implant.

It only took half an hour for Ves to gain a measure of confidence in his cognitive functions.

"This is.. a lot more severe than I thought." He commented.

"In upper society, we humans have become so dependent on letting our implants do the heavy lifting that it has become dangerous. Implant limiters were initially developed to combat this dangerous state and to prepare against occasions where the enemy has hijacked the implants in some way."

"I can see how that is prudent. If my implant suddenly shut down in the middle of a crisis, I would be flailing around while nursing the biggest headache of my life!"

Ves spent over a year with the Archimedes Rubal and immediately fell in love with all of its formidable functions. The partial digitization of his mind had increased his productivity so much that he couldn't imagine living without it anymore!

He automatically assumed that his new, improved state of mind was a permanent upgrade.

However, this incident reminded him that nothing was foolproof! Even though he voluntarily placed the implant limiter on his head this time, that might not be the case in the future!

If someone hostile intended to cripple him by latching such a device on his head, then he would definitely be incapacitated for a long time!

"I have to get some implant limiters on my own and get used to living without my cranial implant."

"You don't have to obtain a limiter for that. Your implant already comes with an off switch."

"Oh. I never realized that. Thanks, Gloriana."

Though Ves lost his biggest tool in mech design, he was still confident he could design a workable third-class striker mech in 3 days!

He had taken part in competitions before, and back then he could only dream of cranial implants!

This design duel should have been familiar territory to him. Though he hadn't dueled anyone for a while, Ves still believed he was capable of designing a mech in haste!

"Have you figured out your strategy yet, Ves?"

"Hmmm. Not really."

"Uhm, the design phase starts in less than twenty minutes. Your opponent must have already formed a detailed sketch of his design in his mind!"

"I can figure that out once I am sitting in front of a design interface." Ves waved away her concern. "Right now, it's more important that I form a strong vision and select the right design concept."

"So.. are you going to retread our old work and try to design a stripped down variant of our Doom Guard design?"

Ves shook his head. "Mr. Armalon will be expecting that. In truth, I expected him to object to my choice of mech type. The fact that he still let my choice through means that he's either confident he can counter any Doom Guard-derived design, or he is very familiar with striker mechs in general. I just don't know!"

Up until now, Ves still didn't know Jovy's design philosophy.

"Master Willix is aware you're not familiar with your opponent. She lent me a file that contains some details on his design philosophy and prior works."

Gloriana activated her comm and projected a document. Ves read through it and discovered that it was a heavily-truncated record of Jovy Armalon.

He immediately directed his eyes towards the fellow's design philosophy.

His eyes widened.

"So this is his design philosophy?! I never expected this from the MTA!"

It turned out that Jovy possessed a Class IX design philosophy, the same as Ves!

One thing was for sure. Jovy was not a rational mech designer! He could never be one with a design philosophy as odd as the one stated in the record.

In order to get an impression on how Jovy applied his design philosophy, Ves manipulated the projection until they displayed some of his mech designs.

Almost all of them consisted of first-class multipurpose mech designs!

#### *Chapter 2136 Growing Your Own Crops*

As a mech designer who grew up within the confines of the MTA, Jovy Armalon enjoyed a very privileged background.

He was not some talent that the MTA recruited later in life. Instead, he was born into the Association, and that pretty much set him up for life.

As long as he didn't slack off in his studies and earnestly pursued the path laid out by his parents, there was no way he would fail as a mech designer!

Of course, the biggest hurdle stopping many ambitious MTA mech designers from gaining real prominence was the jump from Apprentice to Journeyman.

Even the MTA couldn't ensure guaranteed promotion. No matter how many tricks the Association pulled off in order to skew the odds in its favor, the next generation of mech designers ultimately had to rely on themselves to advance!

Quite a lot of promising mech designers failed. No matter how many mechs they designed or books they studied, those with worse talent and discipline nonetheless managed to exceed them due to pure chance!

To many privileged young mech designers, this was unfair!

Even space peasants who could only design mechs that were just a fraction as strong were able to advance to Journeymen, yet some of the best young talents of the MTA simply couldn't!

No matter if someone was a lowly space peasant or a veritable galactic prince, becoming a high-ranking mech designer remained an elusive dream to many of them! Stopping at Apprentice for the rest of their lives was an indignity that many of them couldn't stomach.

Only a few of their friends and former classmates managed to overcome this hurdle. Once they became Journeymen, the MTA invested heavily in their subsequent advancement, because each of them had the potential to advance to Master.

The same could not be said for the masses that had been left behind!

While the MTA still treated these stalled Apprentices well, their role in the Association would never amount to anything unless they switched career tracks.

Those who gave up early often succeeded in transitioning to a management or other professional career track.

Those who persisted in their efforts continued to languish at the local branches and other bottom positions.

Fortunately, Jovy Armalon escaped this fate. In comparison to his peers, he advanced to Journeyman when he was 27 years old, which was quite average within the Association.

On the surface, Ves, Gloriana and Jovy all stood at the same height. All three of them carried the title of Journeyman Mech Designer.

In practice, they were vastly different.

For a long time, Ves sat at the bottom of the totem pole. He was a third-class mech designer, which meant that his skills and design experience only allowed him to design the lowest class of mechs.

No matter how talented he was, no matter how promising his design philosophy could be, it did not change the fundamental fact that he would amount to nothing if he was dumped in a first or second-class state!

Gloriana started off at a higher height. Though she had not reached the top, any casual mech she designed could squash anything developed by Ves in an instant!

As a second-class mech designer, she accumulated a lot more knowledge and had overcome a lot more hurdles in order to design a more advanced class of mechs.

Yet compared to Ves and Gloriana, Jovy had to work a lot harder to become a Journeyman! The amount of knowledge and technical acumen required to design the most advanced mechs in existence was at least five to ten times harder than designing second-class mechs!

The barrier of entry to become a first-class mech designer was so high that it was practically impossible for baseline humans to study all of the knowledge required to become a mere Novice!

Yet once someone like Jovy became capable of designing a first-class multipurpose mech, they became eligible to participate in the most advanced circle of the mech industry!

First-class mechs were so powerful and incorporated so much advanced technology that they were capable of expressing all kinds of abilities.

As a consequence, the design philosophies that first-class mech designers developed also tended to be more conceptually diverse and advanced!

From his own experiences back in the Bright Republic and other third-rate states, the local mech designers tended to specialize in basic and fundamental aspects.

On one hand, third-class mech designers didn't have as many toys to play with. There was only so much they could specialize in, because the other options were simply too expensive or advanced for them to touch!

What was the point of a lesser mech designer specializing in something as ludicrously powerful as positron beam weapons? Hardly any mech they designed with such a gun would sell because their price tags would simply be too high!

That said, Ves didn't believe that the specializations of third-class mech designers were inferior. Though the odds were low, each of them still had the potential to advance to Master and contribute something meaningful to the mech industry.

The issue was that compared to lowly third-class mech designers, people like Jovy had more choice! Worse yet, they often took advantage of it in order to pursue dazzling specializations!

According to his record, Jovy Armalon specialized in 'probability manipulation'.

"Probability manipulation?"

Ves sounded flustered. This label sounded as useless as metaphysical man-machine symbiosis.

To those in the know, more words weren't needed.

To those who were in the dark, the description left out 99 percent of what was really taking place!

Fortunately, Gloriana provided him with a little context. "I've spent some time at Centerpoint. Whenever I hear about MTA mech designers, they're often paired with abstract, high-level specializations. Probability manipulation is absolutely not simple. If I would wager a guess, I think it has to do with affecting luck."

Affecting luck?

Ves scratched his head, taking care not to bump his implant limiter.

"How in the hell does that even work? Is he rolling a bunch of dice and picking the most favorable one? Is his mechs capable of stealing the 'luck' of their opponents?"

"I don't know." Gloriana shrugged. "All I can say is that MTA mech designers like Jovy are often groomed by the Association to adopt a certain design philosophy. Probability manipulation may be a field that his mentors or superiors are highly interested in. This means that it can be really powerful if expressed in full."

From his own understanding of the MTA, Ves knew that it liked to act like a manor lord. The Association lazily resided in its estate while the tenant farmers in the form of indigeneous mech designers toiled in the farms.

Occasionally, some of the tenant farmers made a bountiful harvest. That was the point where the manor lord dispatched his dreaded tax collectors and appropriated the bulk of the harvested crops.

However, this model did not preclude the nobles from tending their own fields. Not every mech designer who worked for the MTA had to be rational. Even the Association couldn't wait for the peasants to cultivate the crops it desired the most.

Sometimes, it was best to do the job themselves!

Despite its unassuming label, Ves did not underestimate Jovy's specialization in the slightest. He too took advantage of ambiguous words to hide the extent of his design philosophy.

As two peas in the same pod, he was certain that his dueling opponent was probably capable of confounding everyone.

If probability manipulation was as sophisticated and horrible as Ves feared, then it shouldn't have been a surprise that the MTA didn't pay more attention to his increasingly more drastic design philosophy.

The MTA already nurtured countless mech designers with odd but powerful specialties!

When Ves and Gloriana studied a sample of Jovy's work, they couldn't decipher anything. The highly-advanced first-class multipurpose mechs contained so many different systems, many of which they had never been exposed to, that the mechs themselves were shrouded in mist!

The information that Master Willix made available revealed too little about Jovy. This was a very serious deficiency.

Perhaps this was her way of compensating for all of the advantages that Ves accrued!

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat."

Gloriana remained hopeful, though. "Don't worry Ves, I believe in you. You already set the terms in your favor. Even if Jovy enjoys an information advantage, you can still beat him with absolute strength. Your design philosophy is absolutely not weak!"

She was right, but Ves still found it problematic that he essentially couldn't anticipate how Jovy's competition mech actually fought!

Even the consolation that they would be pushing forth cheap, low-spec striker mechs failed to shore up his confidence. How could a design philosophy like probability manipulation enhance the combat performance of such a mech?

Ves had no idea, and that scared him. Jovy appeared in his mind as an enormous devil who liked to roll dice!

"I guess I just have to focus on my strengths and hope for the best." He sighed.

He soon calmed down and regained his composure. This wasn't the first time he had come under pressure.

With Gloriana supporting him from the side, Ves began to sound out a couple of ideas.

"I have only three days to design a striker mech, so it will have to be fairly basic. Since this duel pits two striker mechs against each other, the competition might revolve around which mech can endure the most heat."

Gloriana shook her head. "That is not necessarily the case. Flamethrowers are the most ubiquitous weapons of striker mechs, but hardly the only one. Shotguns are the second-most prevalent weapons wielded by striker mechs. If tweaked correctly, their precision and penetrative power can be quite formidable."

The MTA developed an elaborate set of rules governing design duels. When two mech designers agreed to design a specific mech type, then their competition mechs had to fit the classic definition of their chosen archetype!

In the case of third-class striker mechs, Ves could only choose from a limited selection of weapons that were typically associated with this mech type.

Just to be sure, Ves activated his comm and called up the rules. They stated quite clearly that striker mechs weren't allowed to wield precision rifles or swords. Such weapons fell outside the scope of striker mechs!

Additionally, it turned out that he wasn't even allowed to add secondary weapons such as pistols or knives.

A design duel attempted to determine which of the duelists designed the better mech. In this case, neither of them were allowed to warp the definition of striker mechs in an attempt to counter them! That would defeat the point of the duel and negate its comparison function!

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "Before I come up with a vision, I should pin down the primary armament. As far as I'm concerned, I have three choices: a flamethrower or a shotgun."

Which one suited this design duel the best?

There were actually more choices, but they were not very suitable due to several reasons. Either they fell outside the scope of the rules, or required a much larger budget to make them viable.

Weapons such as fluid projectors could be very effective in disabling an opposing mech. However, at their paltry budget, there wasn't enough room for an effective fluid projector system!

With just 600,000 hex credits at their disposal, both of them had to design a mech in the same price category as the Desolate Soldier.

What limited their options even further was that striker mechs were much heavier and incorporated a lot more materials than rifleman mechs.

"There's not enough money to go around!"

Both Ves and Jovy had to stretch their budget as much as possible if they wanted to elevate the performance of their designs.

Right now, Ves wondered which weapon suited his competition mech the best under the circumstances.

"Flamethrower, or shotgun?"

*Chapter 2137 Vexating Luck*

As Ves recently designed the Doom Guard, he knew quite a lot about striker mechs.

Even after he temporarily lost access to his cranial implant, the memories were still fresh in his mind. He possessed a good understanding of the design choices he needed to make.

Of course, the Doom Guard was a spaceborn mech while his competition mech would be a landbound mech, so there were plenty of differences.

Still, the overall framework remained the same. Striker mechs were slow but tough machines that served a defensive function. Their armament always consisted of ranged weapons with a wide area of effect but also limited range and punch.

This was because they were mainly designed to take out fast, lightly-armored mechs. These light skirmishers and the like often proved to be the bane of traditional ranged mechs such as rifleman mechs or artillery mechs.

Striker mechs were the exception to this rule. Their weapons didn't require pinpoint accuracy to hit an elusive light mech. They just had to point their weapon in the general direction of an agile machine and pull the trigger. Even if their aim was off, the billowing flames or expanding shotgun pellets would more than likely not hit the target anyway!

Obviously, this paradigm did not apply to this design duel.

Both would be fielding defensive mechs that wouldn't be zipping around the arena as if they were mice.

Instead, they would face each other off in the most brutal and direct fashion possible!

"This will come down to a battle of attrition." Ves murmured. "With such a low budget, both Jovy and I can forget about designing a mobile striker mech. We will both have

clad our mechs with lots of cheap armor plating and arm them with weapons that are expressly designed to chew through armor!"

No matter how strange Jovy's design philosophy sounded, Ves doubted that the MTA mech designer could overcome the hard limitations of the striker mech type.

He began to envision all kinds of mechs and battle scenarios.

With two viable weapon types, Ves had to take four basic scenarios into account.

If Ves and Jovy both opted for flamethrowers, then the resulting battle basically amounted to which mech could endure the heat the longest!

If both of their mechs were armed with shotguns, then the battle would turn into a slugging match.

If Ves and Jovy opted for different weapons, then the results would become a lot more interesting.

In reality, Ves had to take way more scenarios into account than just these four. This was because there was a considerable amount of leeway in the design of their mechs.

As long as either of them were creative enough, they could definitely come up with something unconventional that stretched the limits of the tools at their disposal!

This was what made design duels exciting and unpredictable.

Ves did not have much time to make a choice. Time was running out and the design phase would soon commence.

With minutes to go, Ves wanted to come up with a viable vision right away.

"I think I'll go with flamethrowers." He said. "I've never worked with shotguns and while I'm confident that I can handle this simple weapon system, it's best to stick to familiar territory."

His knowledge base was also very suited to design mechs that handled heat and energy. He recently acquired relevant Sub-Skills such as Heat-Resistant Materials I, which would come in very handy in managing the heat levels of his design!

Ves figured that flamethrowers were also ultimately more suited to take down an armored mech.

The issue with shotguns was that they inflicted dispersed damage. With the dueling rules prohibiting the use of slugs or other armor-piercing projectiles, Ves could only make do with a tight spread of small-sized pellets.

Certainly, as long as the shotgun weapon system was strong enough, it could still chew through armor plating.

The problem was that the shotgun wielder needed to attack the same section continuously. Even if the opponent was a sluggish striker mech, it would never stand around and make it easy to pile up the damage on a specific part!

With a flamethrower, a striker mech could beat another striker mech by cooking it. Even if the flames weren't potent enough to melt the armor plating, the heat transferred to the metal had to go somewhere!

Usually, the heat applied to the armor plating bled through the internals of the mech. Unlike solid alloy, delicate internal components were much less capable of resisting excessive thermal energy!

Therefore, a duel between two flamethrower-wielding mechs usually ended when one of them spontaneously shut down because too many of its internals simply worked no more.

The biggest question Ves faced right now was whether Jovy chose to arm his striker mech with a flamethrower as well.

This wasn't a transparent design duel. Jovy had already been moved to another part of the workshop that was closed off from his current location. This meant that Ves had to make a very difficult design choice.

Should he design his striker mech to withstand thermal attacks, ballistic attacks or both?

The conventional answer should be to design his mech to cope with both possibilities. This was the standard answer and one that applied to most conventional striker mech designs.

His Doom Guard for example incorporated a premium armor system that offered a lot of resistance against laser beams, ballistic shells, kinetic rounds, melee impacts and so on. No matter what kind of weapon it faced, his Doom Guard easily endured the punishment!

Sadly, the same did not apply to the current design duel. The budget of the Doom Guard was around 2.5 times greater than the budget of his competition mech!

With the Doom Guard, Ves had the luxury of incorporating a decent, all-round armor system that provided adequate protection against any damage type.

With the paltry budget he was currently working with, his competition mech could never offer adequate protection against both physical damage and thermal damage.

Perhaps the only relief was that Jovy faced the exact same situation.

"You should opt for a balanced armor system." Gloriana suggested. "It's the most likely choice and one that minimizes risk. Sure, you won't win out, but you won't lose out either. Your opponent will likely make the same choice as well."

Ves shook his head. "I disagree. Since I've decided to arm my mech with a flamethrower, my mech won't gain an inherent advantage against Jovy's mech if both of us pursue this strategy. However, I'm in big trouble if he fields a mech that is specifically designed to resist heat."

"These are what ifs, Ves. You'll keep going around in circles if you obsess over these possibilities."

She was right, but Ves had a different view on the matter.

"Jovy's specialization is probability manipulation." He said. "While I'm not sure what he can do, I can make a few guesses. One of them is that he's probably pretty lucky!"

His girlfriend frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"Let's say he flips a coin. Mathematically, there is a 50 percent chance of winning. But what if that isn't the case with Jovy? What if.. he can manipulate his luck so that he has a 60 percent chance of winning? What if he can manipulate my luck so that I have a 40 percent of winning?"

This was a dreadful power if that was the case!

"That's ridiculous, Ves! Math is math! Probability is probability! Sure, some improbable flukes might happen if you flip the coin several times. However, the longer it goes on, the more the outcomes will even out and match the theoretical probabilities."

That was the law of large numbers in a nutshell. You could get lucky once, twice or thrice, but it was impossible for someone to get lucky 1,000 times in a row!

"The issue here is that Jovy doesn't have to flip the coin so many times. Two is enough!" Ves retorted. "He needs one flip to determine the correct weapon type and another flip to choose the right armor system! If he gets lucky twice, he will win the duel before our mechs have even entered the arena!"

Jovy truly vexed his opponents with his vague and mysterious design philosophy.

Ves began to feel what it was like to stand in the shoes of his competitors when they became confused what metaphysical man-machine symbiosis actually meant.

"It's finally time for you to get a taste of your own medicine." She quipped.

When it came to luck, Ves wasn't sure how he fared. In fact, he didn't really believe this concept even existed. It might be that he had completely mischaracterized Jovy's design philosophy.

However, he didn't dare to rule out this option. Even if Jovy's specialty applied to mechs in a much more mundane fashion, manipulating luck might be one of his 'superpowers'!

Every mech designer seemed to develop some sort of ability related to their specialization. Ves was able to communicate with all forms of life. Gloriana possessed a very keen eye for flaws. Ketis could make her blades sharper.

As for Jovy... who knew.

With so many difficult choices to take into account, Ves felt as if he was stuck at a crossroads!

Which of the roads led to glory and which of them led to his doom?

"Maybe I should take advantage of my own design philosophy." He muttered. "If Jovy can abuse his superpower to his advantage, then so should I!"

Knowing that Master Willix likely kept a very close eye on him, Ves had never shed his crazy hat. He still wore it, and right now it induced him to kneel onto the floor and clasp his hands.

He concentrated his mind.

"Prophet Ylvaine, please enlighten me. What design choices should I make?"

Though he made contact with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment, it didn't really answer his prayer. The fragment merely replied with a muddled impression before cutting off the contact!

Though vague, Ves understood the answer. Ylvaine basically told him that predictions couldn't be made on demand! It was pointless to come to Ylvaine in order to ask the winning numbers of a lottery!

Ves felt the urge to vomit. Was this the best that the Great Prophet could do? Where was its vaunted prediction ability? For all of the hype surrounding Prophet Ylvaine, it turned out that his spiritual fragment could only catch uncontrolled glimpses!

Why the hell couldn't this design spirit tell him what Jovy had in mind?!

He sighed. It was just a fragment after all.

His expression hardened. "I can go round and round in circles, or I can just make a choice."

Ves decided to turn to his heart. What kind of striker mech did he wish to design?

He already knew the answer. Ves wanted to design a mech that practically embodied heat! He wanted to design a mech that not only spewed out copious amounts of heat, but also bathed in it! This was the competition mech that his heart yearned to design!

"I've made my choice." He stated.

His intuition wasn't very helpful in these circumstances. He had no choice but to go in blind and hope that Jovy did not come up with a shotgun-wielding mech clad with heat-resistant armor.

Now that he had passed this hurdle, it was time for him to formulate a vision.

"I already have something in mind." He grinned.

He wanted to design a mech that revelled in heat! No matter what kind of probability shenanigans that Jovy's mech employed, as long as the battle devolved into a contest of heat, Ves did not think his mech would lose out!

That said, Ves needed to add some extra oomph to his competition mech. His strength had always been his glows.

He needed to add the right one to his mech!

The next question he faced was whether he should incorporate a design spirit or hold himself back by employing a weaker image.

Ves had no illusions that this design duel presented an opportunity for Master Willix to see him in action in a serious setting. He might expose something he didn't want to if he made too much use of his specialty!

#### *Chapter 2138 Planning Against Luck*

The decision on whether he should go all-out or hold himself back did not occupy him for long.

He wanted to win. Even though he would still be able to earn some rewards if he lost, he really wanted the extra MTA credits and the right to permanently own the Darkbreak module. This might be the only opportunity for him to get his hands on a superb communications module.

In addition, with his crazy hat, he didn't fear exposing his ability to empower any of his mech designs with an immediate boost by instilling them with one of his existing design spirits.

In fact, such an act played right in his hand! Ves would reveal to Master Willix and the MTA that he truly did have access to the so-called proto-gods!

No matter how hastily he designed his mechs, as long as their spiritual foundation was strong enough, he could immediately impart with a powerful glow!

Though this would reveal a lot about his current capabilities, Ves did not mind it very much. Not only did such an act reinforce his current facade, it also obscured his more sensitive secrets!

Now that he made this choice, Ves had to decide what kind design spirit and what kind of glow he wanted to instill in his mech.

"It would be nice to have something that embodies fire or heat."

Sadly, his current arsenal of design spirits lacked such an option. Ves had to adopt a more indirect approach, just like he did with the Doom Guard.

Even though the Doom Guard was a striker mech that depended heavily on its flamethrower, Ves nonetheless managed to add a different dimension to it by bestowing it with a terror glow.

He would have to do something similar this time!

"Alright. Time is up! The design phase starts now! You have 72 hours to design and complete your competition mech!" Master Willix announced.

Gloriana kissed him on the cheek and wished him good luck before she scurried away.

He already missed her warmth as he called up a design interface.

Ves began to sketch some outer contours of the mech in his imagination. Due to losing access to his implant, his precision and mental calculations grew worse, causing his sketch to look very crooked!

Nonetheless, the lines already provided him with an impression of the mech that he wanted to turn into reality.

Ves wanted to design a hefty mech. Though its mobility would probably be awful, that wasn't a big deal if the duel ended up as a battle of attrition.

Only the mech that lasted the longest would win the duel!

The heat resistance of a mech depended on many factors, but two of them stood out.

First, the more armor, the better the mech could cope with heat.

Thinner armor plating not only held less heat, but also transferred it faster to the vulnerable internal components of a mech.

However, the type of materials also played a role.

Some materials warmed up faster than other materials when injected with heat.

Therefore, the thickest mech did not always outperform the thinner mechs when it came to absorbing heat. The quality of their armor system played a major role!

However, due to the current budget constraints, Ves did not have much choice. He could only choose between a large selection of cheap armor systems that didn't boast a stellar heat capacity.

To put it simply, his striker mech was already destined to be fat and sluggish. He just had to choose how much he was willing to weigh down his design.

"Should I lean towards offense, defense or strive towards balance?" He wondered.

Most of the time, Ves disliked balance. He would rather add some pronounced strengths and weaknesses to his mechs in order to distinguish them. Therefore, he only considered the first two options.

"If I pick offense, my mech will have to end the battle quickly. My machine won't be able to hold long against enemy attacks. If I pick defense, then the duel will veer even further towards a battle of attrition."

Which one fit his strengths better? Which one fit Jovy's strengths better?

The main advantage that Ves enjoyed was that he was able to affect the moods of mech pilots.

However, Ves did not forget that MTA personnel exhibited a remarkable degree of resistance against the Doom Guard's glow. Some of them even acted as if they were completely immune!

Therefore, Ves did not think it was a good idea to focus on demoralizing the opponent. He would have focused on empowering Joshua.

"It's a good thing I specifically picked him out as my champion." He muttered.

Of all of his mech pilots, only Joshua understood his glows the best. He could adapt to any design spirit no matter how incompatible they sounded.

As the only non-Ylvainan to be able to pilot a Deliverer mech, Joshua fully deserved to be one of the few adopted Larkinsons without a compound name!

With such a fantastic mech pilot at his disposal, Ves did not have to worry about potential incompatibilities or lack of immersion.

He made his choice after exploring both options.

"I need to end the battle quickly." He concluded. "I'll take an offensive approach."

The main reason why he wanted to focus on offense rather than defense was that the latter would result in a longer match.

Against a mech that had been designed with 'probability manipulation' in mind, that effectively gave Jovy's specialty more opportunities to flip a coin!

Therefore, Ves vaguely guessed that time would be against his side. The longer the match dragged on, the greater the chance an unfortunate development would cripple his competition mech.

Now that he had settled on his approach, he went over his stable of design spirits to see which one fit this emphasis the best.

He first went over one of his oldest design spirits, the Black Phoenix.

"Too weak." He shook his head.

Even though it seemed a natural fit, it didn't possess any special powers and its spiritual strength wasn't all that impressive. It was mainly a product of his earlier years when he mainly focused on the X-Factor.

At best, Joshua would only receive a modest enhancement to his aggressive instincts.

That wasn't good enough as far as Ves was concerned.

He always intended to upgrade or reshape the Black Phoenix once he was ready to modernize the Blackbeak design. For now, the outdated design spirit fell out of his contention.

Other potential choices included Zeigra, the Golden Cat, the Superior Mother.

Imparting each or multiple of them in his mech would result in profound effects.

"Hmmm."

His choice had to match his vision and complement his design concept. Since Ves intended to design an offense-oriented mech, he ideally wanted to pair it with a design spirit that complimented this focus.

He had half a mind to pick Nyxie and design a mech that incorporated this terrible being. Unfortunately, he wasn't in a position to visit his vault and harvest a spiritual fragment from this uncooperative entity.

Besides, Ves strongly believed that such an act would breed disaster! Joshua turning crazy was the least of his worries!

Zeigra was not his strongest design spirit, and he was similarly uncooperative. However, Zeigra also possessed a killer instinct and a primal aggression that would fit perfectly with an offensive mech.

His Proudful Soldier mechs already showed what Zeigra could do with just a mote of his spirituality.

The Golden Cat did not possess a strong focus in combat. Ves designed her as an ancestral spirit first and a design spirit second.

That said, she was still able to empower mech pilots in a comprehensive way. She offered every mech pilot a range of boosts, though most of them weren't very relevant in this case.

"She doesn't mesh well with a striker mech." Ves shook his head.

One of the hidden features of the Golden Cat was her potential to bestow mech pilots with the wisdom and fighting instincts of better mech pilots. The more she became exposed to Larkinson mech pilots, the more potent this ability grew.

Though Goldie never exhibited this particular ability before, Ves was pretty sure she was capable of doing so, especially now that she had matured into her powers.

"Sadly, it doesn't matter too much in this case. Striker mechs have a low skill ceiling and Joshua is already very skilled."

That left the Superior Mother, his latest and most powerful spiritual product at birth. Though she was still dormant, her passive glow already impressed Ves a lot!

As the ultimate ancestral spirit of the Hexer people, the Superior Mother was multifaceted and adaptable. She could take on the role of a protective mother or a vengeful woman.

The more he thought about it, the more he felt he wanted to give it a try. This design duel was not only an opportunity to win some juicy prizes, but also allowed him to perform a quick experiment!

Even though Joshua was not a Hexer, Ves did not worry about whether his chosen champion was unable to synergize with the Superior Mother.

Joshua would not be Joshua if he was not capable of melding with his mother!

With the Superior Mother as the principal design spirit of his competition mech, Ves filled out his vision even further.

He turned his attention back to the design interface and altered and added some more lines. He began to design a mech that was highly offensive to Hexer sensibilities.

He wanted to design a male mech that could hold its own ground!

Certainly, male Hexer mech pilots weren't only restricted from piloting defensive mechs and support mechs. Yet even if they were allowed to pilot rifleman mechs, they always ended up in a fire support role.

His competition mech was different. Ves designed the mech to be able to defeat an opposing by itself by relying on its own strength!

"This is the mech piloted by a grown-up instead of a man!"

In essence, Ves wanted to put into reality a mech that represented the ideal end state of his attempted reforms.

With the Superior Mother acting as a Trojan Mare in Hexer society, Ves dreamed of changing its entire culture so that boys would finally have the opportunity to grow into men!

Certainly, individuals like Brutus already proved it was possible for women to upgrade the status of boys. The only problem was that male expert pilots were so rare that their existence hardly shook the foundation of the Hegemony.

If mechs like the one he intended to design became popular, then the stubborn female supremacists had to face reality.

The success of this competition mech might even serve as a precursor to some of the Hexer mech designs to come!

As Ves adjusted his draft design to be more in line of his intentions, he began to think how he should characterize the mech.

"Superiority."

This was the central focus he was looking for! He wanted to design a mech that emphasized superiority! He wanted his mech to overpower Jovy's mech with a sense of superiority. He wanted Joshua to fight as if victory was inevitable!

"Hmm. I should also take Jovy's specialty into account."

Probability manipulation suggested that Jovy specialty could increase the positive outcomes of his mech while decreasing the negative outcomes of his opponent's mech.

In order to fight back against these presumed effects, Ves needed to find a way to resist it or inflict more damage in return.

Resisting Jovy's design philosophy was the main reason why Ves decided to focus on superiority. No matter what kind of bad luck befell his mech, its innate superiority would shrug it all off!

Willpower triumphed over everything, including misfortune!

If Ves didn't like the outcome of a coin flip, he would be better off if he fed the coin to Lucky than accept the outcome!

As for finding a way to outdo Jovy's specialty, a very speculative idea suddenly popped into his mind.

The Doom Guard already showed that MTA personnel were very mentally-resilient. Yet not all of them were as resilient as others. Hardly anyone could match the sheer mental and spiritual prowess of Master Willix, after all. With a fairly young MTA mech pilot as Jovy's champion, the fellow should be at least a little susceptible to influencing!

"If it's a universally hostile glow like that of the Doom Guard, then it's easy to arouse his vigilance."

Yet with the Superior Mother, Ves began to think up a different way to hinder the performance of his opponent.

The MTA mech pilot happened to be a male, so what if Ves could leverage the Superiority focus into making him feel inferior?

No matter how much luck Jovy's mech bestowed upon the fellow, as long as he lost some heart, no amount of chance could deliver him victory!

Even if the man was very disciplined, at least some influence was sufficient to decrease his piloting acumen!

Now that Ves fully fleshed out his concept, he felt ready to turn his hasty draft into a complete design.

"This is going to be interesting!"

*Chapter 2139 Regressed Approach*

It had been a while since he designed a mech all by himself.

When Ves looked back into the past, the last time he developed a mech by himself was when he designed the Devil Tiger.

The Devil Tiger Project had been the first time he completely consumed himself in his passion. He went so far out of his way to realize his ambitious vision that he did not even realize that he was working his way towards a masterwork mech.

Even without Lucky's gem, finishing the Devil Tiger would have still led to a lot of gains for him! That was one of the few times he truly felt as if he had vindicated his existence as a mech designer!

Afterwards, he rendez-voused with Gloriana at the Rev Indra System and that spelled the end of his habit of isolating himself in his design lab.

Now, he had someone else at his side when he developed this tendency!

Working with Gloriana was a joy. Both of them were very competent and possessed different but compatible views on mech design.

Designs such as the Soldier variants, the Bright Warrior and the Doom Guard exemplified the synergy they achieved.

As Ves and Gloriana both familiarized themselves with each other's strengths, they adjusted their work accordingly.

Gloriana invested herself in the details, having liberated herself from the need to take the big picture into account. As a mech designer who was highly sensitive towards tiny flaws and imperfections, she would much rather spend her time on resolving these issues than worry about the intangibles.

In contrast, Ves was a big picture guy. He didn't really care too much about the nitpicking that Gloriana often liked to engage in. In his perspective, what did it matter if some tiny flaw caused the acceleration of a mech to drop by 0.01 percent?

Of course, if there were too many flaws, those performance drops all added up to a meaningful difference, but Ves did not want to waste too much time in squashing them all out.

What he wanted to do instead was to come up with a fantastic vision and concept that was so powerful, that it didn't matter if his mech came riddled with flaws!

"Life isn't perfect!"

The difference between Ves and Gloriana was that the former liked to have a little chaos while the latter pursued order.

Ordinarily, both of them would never been able to reconcile their respective design outlooks with each other!

In practice, they learned to compromise with each other. They stepped on each other's toes plenty of times at the start, but over time they learned to walk around each other more carefully.

All of this caused the pair to focus on different aspects of mech design. They neglected their weaknesses and shored up their strengths, knowing that they could lean on their partner to take care of the issues they weren't good at solving!

Both of them thought that everything would be fine and all was right with the galaxy.

That was until Master Willix popped their bubble.

In her last visit, she easily ascertained the state of their collaboration. As a seasoned mech designer who had traveled the breadth of human space, she encountered numerous wonder couples.

She had also seen how developing a deep interdependence with a partner could lead to disaster.

The moment one half of a couple became indisposed, the other half became functionally useless as well!

Thanks to the early warning, both Ves and Gloriana had become aware of this potential outcome. This simple observation was enough to put both of them on guard.

Though neither of them had any intention of breaking their collaborative partnership, they still intended to spend some time on solo projects!

The design duel that Jovy pressed upon Ves turned into an unexpected opportunity for him to refresh his solo approach towards mech design.

Not only that, but with the implant limiter, Ves felt as if he regressed to his older self.

Over the year since he integrated with the Archimedes Rubal implant, he made increasingly more use of its versatile functions.

From storing lots of data to performing rapid calculations, the implant had become inseparable to his life and his work.

Now that the implant limiter interrupted the signal propagation between his natural brain and his artificial bioimplant, Ves felt as if he had regressed to an earlier version of himself.

Relying on his intrinsic brain matter to perform calculations was a lot slower and more imprecise. It was so bad that Ves had to make use of the calculating software provided by the design suite!

"How backwards!"

The lack of direct interfacing between his thoughts and the software slowed him down tremendously. He had to input numbers and formulas manually with his fingers. What used to take milliseconds now expended entire seconds or even minutes.

"Too slow!"

At the start, Ves felt very discomfited by all of the inconveniences of designing mechs the 'traditional way'.

It took hours for him to gradually get accustomed to the old school style of mech design. He already knew what to expect since this was how he originally practiced his craft.

Though Ves initially expected to default to his original approach, he unexpectedly made some alterations.

Ves was not the Apprentice or Journeyman from two or three years ago.

He had matured immensely, designed more mechs, increased his mech affinity and delved his design skills to a greater extent.

All of this and more had pushed him from a starting Journeyman to a rising Journeyman.

Many of the methods he used to employ in the past were crude, outdated or unnecessary.

In a design duel, speed was paramount.

Duels between mechs or infantry combatants only lasted for a few minutes to half an hour at most. Rarely did they stretch on all the way to an hour!

Design duels were different. There was no practical way for mech designers up to Senior to express even a fraction of their design ability in just 30 minutes. As for

cobbling something up in a couple of hours, the resulting mechs hardly presented the mech designers in a good light!

A proper design duel had to take at least a day, and each additional day significantly increased the quality of the competition mechs.

Ves supposed that Master Willix wanted him to design a decent mech, otherwise the design duel didn't have to stretch on for so long.

A span of 72 hours was never enough to design a proper mech. Ves could never adopt the same approach he reserved for his serious design projects.

Simply put, designing a competition mech was basically a game of cutting corners.

He had to rush through many steps and budget his time in a way that allowed him output to remain as high as possible.

Good judgement was indispensable. He needed to make a very careful choice on which areas to neglect and which areas to invest his time in. He had to maximize his return on time investment!

There were many specific sections of the mech that took days or weeks to get it right, yet only yielded a modest performance boost.

It was a waste of time for Ves to go over them with a meticulous mindset. Knowing that he would only end up in a quagmire, he sloppily fleshed out his sketch in a matter of hours before moving on, knowing full well that he had left behind a host of flaws!

"Gloriana would probably go mad with rage if she can see my work now!"

Even though he only worked out a third of his mech design at this point, the mech already looked like a hot mess!

One of the benefits of working alongside Gloriana was that he had become familiar with the way she looked at mechs.

Right now, the mech was so sloppily put together that he would probably bash his head against his desk if he was anything like his girlfriend!

He loved it. Nothing excited him more than realizing his vision and making his mech come to life one step at a time.

The birth of any life was rife with uncertainty and chaos. With no nagging woman by his side to question all of his decisions, Ves freed himself from the shackles that caged his boundless creativity.

He implemented numerous solutions that he would have never applied when Gloriana was around. He made unconventional design choices that seemed sub-optimal but meshed much better with his vision for the mech.

Just because Ves chose to center his mech around superiority didn't mean that the mech should be superior in quality.

Gloriana might disagree, but Ves was different! A mech like the Devil Tiger proved that his own approach worked!

Some flaws weren't a big deal. Others were merely subjectively flawed to only some people. Even if Ves left behind some gaping vulnerabilities, it didn't matter as long as the overall performance of the mech was up to standard.

This was the essence of his design style! Ves always prioritized big ideas over small details!

With his current mech design, that meant designing a flamethrower-wielding striker mech that could scorch the competition before it got scorched in return!

Ves gambled everything on the application and management of heat. If Jovy happened to design a mech that expressly countered his design concept, then so be it. As long as this was not the case, his mech should have all the opportunities available to turn the tables on its opponent!

Knowing that his competition mech would face another heavily-armored mech, Ves opted to choose a special flamethrower system.

"I can't design a traditional striker mech." He murmured.

A humanoid striker mech often possessed articulating arms and made use of an external flamethrower.

However, this flamethrower was actually a huge vulnerability in a dueling environment!

At the very least, rifleman mechs had ways of keeping their distance against their opponents. The chance of their rifles getting shot was not that big at range, especially if the weapon had been reinforced.

However, no matter how much Ves beefed up the flamethrower, it would always be susceptible to attacks. If Jovy's mech happened to bring a shotgun, then it could easily blast the flamethrower apart, thereby winning the duel right then and there!

For these reasons and more, Ves decided to apply some frontline mech design principles to his competition mech.

Instead of adding hands to his mech, he instead cut them off and mounted internal flamethrowers into them. Due to the space they took up, Ves had to enlarge the rest of the arms themselves, causing his competition mech to resemble an upright gorilla!

These considerable changes altered the entire balance of the mech, but with his keen understanding of Battle Mechatronics, he easily adjusted the overall frame.

Regardless whether his competition mech would duel against a mech armed with a flamethrower or a shotgun, it was a good idea to keep all of the important parts behind a good layer of armor!

Every system had to be internal. From the flamethrower modules to the propellant, Ves could not afford to expose any of it to enemies.

His design choices automatically made his mech look fat and bloated. That said, Ves did not actually pile as much armor onto his competition mech as he could have. He wanted to retain at least some semblance of mobility.

He didn't feel confident in his mech if it was too immobile. While his weighed-down striker mech design still boasted weak mobility, at the very least it should be enough to provide more tactical options to Joshua!

After two days, the overall direction of the mech design had already been set. Despite all of the limitations, Ves managed to design a mech that was only moderately worse off than if he could still make use of his implant.

"This mech design is missing something." He hummed.

While everything went fairly smoothly, he vaguely suspected that sticking to convention wasn't enough to overcome a talent like Jovy!

Yet the problem he faced was identical to the one that plagued him while he design the Doom Guard.

His striker mech did not possess enough capacity!

#### *Chapter 2140 Design Philosophy Grades*

Having spent two furious days on realizing his vision, Ves felt as if his competition design lacked something.

He felt the same itch whenever he felt as if his mech ideas lacked some sort of gimmick.

For example, the Deliverer wouldn't be so remarkable without Ylvaine lending his prediction ability to the mech pilot.

The Doom Guard would never have shot up from the ranks of striker mechs and form its own category if not for its terror glow.

Right now, Ves felt that while his competition mech managed to meet most of his expectations, he felt he set his sights too low.

"I can add more to mech design." He whispered.

The problem was the lack of capacity.

Choosing to center the duel around striker mechs was one of his ways of constraining Jovy.

Letting this MTA mech designer design a swordsman mech or any other mech that offered a lot of skill expression was just a disaster in the making!

With all of the tricks that Jovy had at his disposal, there were way too many opportunities for him to empower his mech beyond the level of an indigenous mech designer!

While Ves did not regret this choice, it harmed Ves just as much!

Even if competition mechs weren't required to last as long, even if Ves could tune up the performance of the individual parts to their breaking point, he still ran out of space!

This was the point where he resorted to his specialty and imbued his mech design or its intended design spirit with some special feature.

However, Ves did not need to turn his head to see Master Willix floating high above the floor.

Ever since the design phase of the duel commenced, the Master had been keeping a constant eye on both contestants. Like a goddess watching over her subjects, hardly any of their actions escaped her vision!

So far, Ves did not bother too much with her blatant observation. He couldn't do anything about it, and he hadn't done anything remarkable aside from concentrating his mind and imbuing a gradual amount of spirituality into his mech design.

So far, the mech already acquired a rudimentary spiritual foundation. Though it wasn't nearly as deep and strong as the spiritual foundations of his serious mech designs, it was already sufficient to host a design spirit like the Superior Mother!

Yet was this everything he was capable of doing? For a time, Ves slowed down his work as he began to ask himself whether he should feel resigned to this bland outcome.

His sense of deprivation grew stronger. As time went by, he increasingly felt as if he was missing something essential. Without adding this extra factor into his mech design, he could forget about winning the upcoming design duel!

He paused and halted his design work entirely. He stared dully at his current design, trying to do his best to pin down what it lacked!

Meanwhile, above the air, Gloriana had floated next to Master Willix and joined her in observing both contestants.

While Ves inexplicably paused and let precious minutes pass by, on the other side of the workshop, Jovy continued to build his design at a steady and confident pace.

No matter what kind of odd conditions he faced, this was hardly the MTA mech designer's first challenge!

It wasn't easy for him to become a mech designer and advance to Journeyman in the halls of the MTA. The workload was incredible, the amount of knowledge he needed to master was tremendous and he constantly had to compete over resources!

Winning design duels was one of Jovy's favorite methods to get ahead of his peers. Not even the thought of facing a certified masterwork mech designer swayed his confidence in his strength and ability!

"Mr. Armalon is an avid design duelist." Master Willix noted and she approved of what she saw in him. "He has dueled over sixty times, and won at least forty of them, and hardly anyone of them is weak!"

Gloriana widened her eyes. "How can Jovy be so strong?"

"Aside from working hard, his design philosophy is very formidable. What he can do for now is just the tip of the iceberg, but even so, he can already confound many rivals. Even in the galactic center, his specialty has to be taken seriously!"

"It's that formidable?! How come I haven't heard about it more?"

The Master Mech Designer sighed. "Probability manipulation touches upon some very high-level abstract concepts. There are many ways to classify design philosophies, and sorting them by subject is merely one of them. In the MTA, it is not just the subject that matters, but also the grade."

This was something that Gloriana never heard of! Even when she lived at Centerpoint, she never sorted design philosophies by grades!

"How do you determine the grades?"

"By difficulty, scope, ambition and other factors." Master Willix patiently explained. "Ordinarily, I wouldn't bring up this topic to a mech designer as young as you. Knowing the grade of your design philosophy is often detrimental to your development. However, since you have become a masterwork mech designer, you have already proven that you are firm in your research direction. It won't hurt to know where you stand and where other mech designers stand."

The Master waved her hand. "In a state such as the Sentinel Kingdom, most local mech designers have developed simple and basic design philosophies. I'm sure you are already familiar with them. They don't have much ambition and they are constrained by their environment. Therefore, they merely seek to make their mechs cheaper, more efficient, more resilient and so on. While their dreams are still admirable, their limited ambition means that it is actually relatively easy to realize their design philosophies."

Of course, owing to the same poor environment, it was very difficult for the local Seniors to advance to Master!

"Where do I stand?" Gloriana asked.

"There is no objective and authoritative way to determine that. If I use my own judgement, I would rate the grade of your design philosophy as middle-high."

That caused Gloriana to pause. A sense of dissatisfaction appeared on her face. "Why just this?"

"You will have to discover that on your own, Miss Wodin." Master Willix replied. "Don't take my word for it. My judgement is different from that of other people. In fact, in order to counteract bias as much as possible, the MTA employs a very comprehensive set of algorithms and comparisons in order to apply the exact same standard to everyone."

"Is the grade set in stone?"

"Never. Mech designers, even high-ranking ones, can constantly evolve and develop their design philosophies. Sometimes, their ambition swells and their grades automatically rise. Other times, they are getting on in their years and see no hope of realizing their impossible dream. By setting their sights lower, they don't have to overcome as many hurdles and have a much better chance of advancing to Master."

Her explanation contained a lot of implications. Gloriana had already caught many of them. "I see. Higher grades are associated with difficult but ambitious design philosophies. Though the odds of breaking through are low, once you do, you can become a very powerful Master! In contrast, lower grades don't require as much effort to realize, but such Masters simply can't strengthen their mechs as much."

"That's not necessarily the case." Willix said. "Low-grade design philosophies aren't necessarily weak, and high-grade design philosophies aren't omnipotent. It is all about

how you use them and how you develop them. Even at Master, when you develop a low-grade design philosophy to an extreme, it is enough to break any high-grade design philosophy!"

This confused Gloriana a bit. "So when it comes to strength, the grade doesn't matter?"

"No, though many mech designers disagree. It's a perspective problem. There are different thoughts on this matter. Because it is less arduous to realize a low-grade design philosophy, there are many Masters who barely make the cut. This has caused the average strength of their group to be quite low. Yet I personally know of many so-called 'low-grade Master Mech Designers' who have come close to reaching the threshold of Star Designer! Once you reach this height, the grade of your design philosophy is no longer an accurate measure of your strength!"

This revelation shocked Gloriana! What Master Willix touched upon was far too high level for a young Journeyman like her to know!

She automatically inferred the situation of mech designers with high-grade design philosophies.

"If I am guessing this right, then high-grade design philosophies are so ambitious and difficult that not a lot of Masters with them have broken through. However, once they do, the performance of their mechs are substantially more powerful because they are able to perform much greater miracles, is that right?"

Willix nodded. "This act of 'performing miracles' as you say is much more drastic at the Master level. You can view it as an amplification of sorts. How strong your design philosophy is when you are a Senior will directly affect how strong it is when you become a Master. That said, many mech designers dream of realizing a powerful design philosophy, but few are able to do so within their lifetimes."

"The few that do are all monsters." Gloriana summed up. "I see. Even though the group of high-grade Masters are small, because their average strengths are so high, it is not difficult to develop the idea that high-grade design philosophies are better!"

Obviously, Master Willix disapproved, otherwise she wouldn't have led Gloriana to this conclusion.

"If it is not presumptuous of me to ask, where does your design philosophy stand?"

"My specialization is gravity systems, and it sounds exactly as boring as you think. The MTA officially categorizes it as a medium-grade design philosophy." Willix smirked. "Yet I have not taken any notice of the insults and disparagements I've received. I have worked diligently while exploring additional applications of my design philosophy in order to raise the performance of my mech designs. Nowadays, I can call myself an equal to many high-grade Masters."

Her status at Halcyon Citadel was high because of that! Not a single resident Master at Centerpoint looked down on her and her modest-sounding specialty!

Gloriana looked even more impressed at Master Willix. In her eyes, this MTA Master was practically a role model to her!

Even if Willix wasn't as exceptional as her rivals, she had long overtaken many of them and continued to make progress even to this day!

"What about Ves and Mr. Armalon?"

Willix turned to Jovy, who was still making a brisk amount of progress. "One of the factors that I have left out is the difficulty of developing a design philosophy. The higher grades are much harder to formulate and internalize. An exceptional design philosophy such as probability manipulation is ranked as a superior-grade design philosophy. This means the requirements to adopt it are extremely demanding. I dare say that in the entire Yeina Star Cluster, there is no one else who can specialize in this strange field!"

"Doesn't that mean that it becomes harder for a Master to develop personal disciples?"

"Partially." Willix admitted. "It takes a very specific person to develop a high-grade design philosophy. The odds of a mech designer meeting all of the requirements naturally is small, but that is when nobody interferes. If a Master wants to nurture a personal disciple, he can always mold a student."

"I see. You haven't told me how Ves stands, though."

"Your partner is... difficult to pin down. I have some thoughts about his design philosophy, but I cannot say anything about its grade other than that it is fairly high. It is just..."

"What's the matter?"

"What is he doing?"

Both of them looked down at Ves, who finally began to move after freezing for fifteen minutes straight.

He began to place his palm into the projection, distorting the mech design he developed up until now.

Ves twisted his fingers, which somehow caused his work to take on a slightly different air!