

Chapter 661 A Simple Transaction

Ves had no idea how an attempt to acquire knowledge of stealth tech and how to fabricate an ultracompact battery spiralled into a full blown lecture and tutoring session.

If he ignored the fact he was wearing a heavily embellished suit of light combat armor that could have been torn straight from a modern day pirate drama, he might have thought he travelled back in time to his student days.

Of course, with a professor like Reno Jimenez instructing him on how to do better, in a pirate admiral's uniform no less, the situation turned into a completely unbelievable event.

Though the Skull Architect may not be the most pleasant individual to converse with, he took a surprisingly patient attitude with Ves when the topic shifted to the technical aspects of their Leiner Grey design.

They did not have to converse that much, since both of them had tasted each other's design philosophies. They also read through each other's design choices and characteristics.

Reading a mech design was a fundamental ability of any mech designer. Ves knew of most of the secrets of the Leiner Grey, and could say with confidence he could reproduce an identical light skirmisher with a seventy percent similarity! The only aspects he failed to get a grasp on were those that concerned higher concepts, areas in which Ves could only begin to touch upon when he advanced to the rank of Journeyman.

As for his counterpart, the Skull Architect might have grasped up to ninety-nine percent of his design style! The two stood at different stages in a mech designer's career. Practically nothing Ves had implemented in his own version of the Leiner Grey could be hidden from an elder mech designer's sight.

Considering the vast experience gap between them, Ves had made several notable errors in his design.

The Skull Architect highlighted the joint sections near the waist. "One of the more egregious loss in performance is the way you handled the leg joints. I can understand why you've thickened these sections, but this size increase leads to a whole cascade of changes..."

The man brutally pointed out several of these major errors, each one illuminating Ves even more. It couldn't be helped, as Ves had been handed over the Leiner Grey design without any manuals or instructions. He inevitably misunderstood some minor details which turned out to have an enormous effect!

As the Senior found nothing else worth noting on, he waved his hand, causing the projections of the designs to fade. "Learn from this experience. Seek out active collaborations. There is no rule in mech design that states that a mech designer ought to work alone. Some of the best mechs come about through combining the strengths of several mech designers. While each contributing mech designer adds another complicating element, the reward is often worth the effort. Tell me, boy, what is your evaluation of your version of the Leiner Grey if it were to be published on the market?"

Ves frowned at this question. "The Leiner Grey is one of the best put-together designs I've had the pleasure of working with, but it makes use of outdated alloys and techniques. It won't gain any traction on the market except for a possible role as training mech, but even then its premium material costs makes it unsuitable for that task. My apologies, it is hard for me to make accurate estimates of the market performance of a second-class mech design."

"The market for second-class mechs is more diverse than the market for third-class mechs. An abundance of wealth and vastly higher budgets allow for

greater combinations of exotics to be used. Other than that, the market for more mundane mech types is more similar than you think. Let me put the question in a different context. What if I decided to publish your variant of the Leiner Grey instead of my original creation as its original design all those years ago?"

"That... I have not performed any detailed market research about how the Friday Coalition's mech market worked like. I'm missing too much information to make a confident judgement about its market performance. That said, even if the simplified version of the Leiner Grey performs fifteen percent worse than the purer version, the design's base specs have always been higher than the average. Therefore, the decrease in performance should still put the Leiner Grey in an acceptable range."

"Yet the cost of the Leiner Grey is too high." The Skull Architect jabbed. "The market may be filled with fools, but if the disparity between your Leiner Grey and its direct competitors is too big, introducing this model on the market will result in more losses than gains."

That unfortunately rang more true for Ves than he'd like. What he did was to take a high-performing mech built with high-quality performance and simplified its operation so that it became more suitable for the mass market.

Yet one of the defining traits of a mass market mech was that its price had to be within a reasonable range! This demand directly contradicted with the high-quality components of the Leiner Grey!

Ves had to admit defeat in this aspect. "The Leiner Grey that I've designed won't do so well because it utilizes expensive, high-performing parts that I'm not using to their full potential. If I had more control over the design, then I would have swapped those unnecessarily expensive parts with cheaper ones that can do the job just as well. The impact on performance will be small, but the costs can easily be reduced by a third!"

"A mech that is modified to such an extent can no longer be called the Leiner Grey." The Senior shook his head, as if disappointed at the solution Ves had come up with. "No matter. This is merely an exercise with an outdated mech design. I have no interest in putting the Leiner Grey for sale again. Let us move to a different matter."

Ves already had an inkling of what Jimenez had to say.

From Mayra, he gained the impression that the Skull Architect valued his time highly. He wouldn't waste a single second on Ves if the possible gains from the conversation didn't surpass the opportunity cost of spending time to improve his designs.

Almost mech designer from the older generation that came in touch with Ves gained a good impression of him. Ves didn't fit the mold of an average mech designer, and that tickled their interest.

However, being different didn't matter if Ves couldn't gain any concrete benefits from the contact. He worked carefully to incorporate subtle elements in his Leiner Grey design that may have been picked up by its original designer.

That the Skull Architect already cleared out this much time from his schedule to talk with Ves was a hopeful sign. However, Ves knew very well that he himself did not merit this treatment solely because he put an interesting spin on the Leiner Grey.

The man Ves was talking to was anything but an altruistic teacher. The Skull Architect wanted something from Ves, and the price may be steep.

"The demonstration of your design abilities have caught my interest. It is very strange to sample your work, boy. I sense a small element of Carmin's influence in your design choices, yet you treat her teachings as a supplement

to your own style of designing mechs. While your design philosophy is on the opposite spectrum of mine, I can respect the direction have decided to take."

"Thank you, sir."

"I wasn't finished yet. Your design philosophy is woefully immature and just a seed compared to the blooming flower that represents my own. However, strength and maturity aside, the intrinsic qualities of both our design philosophies are incredibly suitable to be combined in uneven collaborative projects! The work you have done with the Leiner Grey has already proved that! Out of every test I've issued, yours is one of the few that brings out different facets to my design while adding value to the product!"

Ves treated the Leiner Grey as a serious design project. The mech had to be usable and marketable. While he hadn't quite succeeded with the latter, that was mainly because he lacked the permission to implement wider changes in the design.

"Mayra brought to me because you have need of something of mine, correct?"

"Yes, sir. I'd like to obtain two pieces of knowledge, if you have them. My first demand is to obtain the design specifications of an ultracompact battery, preferably one that I can fabricate with materials available for sale in Mancroft or in the frontier. My second demand is to obtain practical knowledge of reasonably up-to-date stealth technology. I am in the possession of many fragments of stealth shuttles, but reconstructing them into a working vehicle requires theoretical backing that I currently lack."

He decided to be fairly open in his demands. He doubted that the Skull Architect appreciated any obtuse word games on this matter. Besides, the Senior must have already heard what he wanted from Mayra. The only element that was new was his demand for the design specs of an ultracompact battery.

That must have tripped up the Skull Architect's expectations, because the deadly man began to frown in a severe manner. "Stealth tech is already restricted knowledge. It is unthinkable to pass it along like a piece of cabbage on the street. As for ultracompact batteries.. It is technology that is that is ruinously costly to acquire and even more demanding in its application! Are you certain of your demands? Don't ask for what you won't be able to use yourself!"

"I'm certain, sir. If you can help me acquire them at a reasonable price that is within my means, then I would be very grateful."

The Skull Architect chuckled. "Besides mech designers, we are both businessmen. It comes with the territory. I am not in the habit of giving out favors for free, let alone two extremely valuable pieces of knowledge. I like you, boy, but not to the extent to waive their prices, as there are troublesome repercussions I allow them to be spread."

"What.. are your prices?"

"A simple business transaction." The Skull Architect smirked as the discussion finally reached the most interesting part. "You have already demonstrated the result of what our work can do when we combine our strengths. Our design philosophies are opposite and have little overlap with each other, but this creates the condition for some of the best kind of collaborate end results! The biggest issue that is hampering us is our differences in maturity, so for now the only practical collaborate mech designs that we can produce together is for my design to take the lead and for you to develop a variant!"

Ves widened his eyes. He had never thought that the Skull Architect valued his work so highly that his work might actually become for sale! What the Skull Architect suggested was to do the same he had done with the Leiner Grey but do it with an up-to-date mech design that was part of the man's current mech catalog!

In essence, merely had to accept the offer to become the contributing designer of a pirate mech design!

Many Apprentices and Journeymen dreamed of becoming a contributing designer to a mech design that came from the hand of a Senior. Ves already had a taste of the benefits from working on small but key sections of the Leiner Grey.

If his autonomy extended throughout the entire mech frame, then he would be able to test his own nascent design philosophy against a much more developed one in a controlled environment. This alone had the potential of polishing his design principles and strengthen them in a way that made them more cohesive and competitive!

"This.." He felt really mixed about this offer. It was both an opportunity and a really bad idea. If word got out that Ves not only sought out the Skull Architect, but voluntarily helped the man improve his pirate designs, then Ves was no different from a pirate mech designer himself!

His reputation!

Let alone ruining his reputation, Ves might also suffer the same fate as the Skull Architect and get booted out from civilized space! The cost was too high!

Chapter 662 Negotiating Power

"I'm honored that you have considered me worthy enough to value my work to the extent of adding it in your catalog." He began carefully. "But.. I cannot afford to associate my name with yours."

The Skull Architect dismissively waved his hand. "A name is a name. I do not even need to mention you in the first place when putting your variant on the market. Many mech designs that are published each day claim to have been designed by a single designer, but have secretly benefited from assistance from other mech designers. The only reason their credit is absent is because

they are paid extra to keep quiet or because they've been coerced in some way. In any case, it is no issue for us to leave the market guessing."

"Even so, there are other hindrances plaguing such a collaboration effort. The Leiner Grey design you've handed over to me is a lower-level version that doesn't properly convey the majesty of your design. If my contribution is to be ready for sale, I will have to work on the purest version of your designs. This.."

Ves didn't need to continue. Apprentices were generally kept away from those high-level designs for a good reason. They couldn't handle the profoundness hidden within. Even if he possessed a much higher tolerance due to his Spirituality, it was still a highly unpleasant experience for him to work on something that carried the touch of a Senior.

"These are trivial issues to overcome." The Skull Architect dismissed his protestations. It was in his interest to do so in this negotiation. "Many mech designers dream of contributing to designs of a higher level! Don't think I haven't noticed your eyes light up when I mentioned it. Not only will you be able to experience advanced design concepts that will give you a head-start in designing higher-ranked mechs, you will also be able to hammer your design philosophy into shape!"

"While I admit those benefits sound attractive, the practical limitations remain. I don't dare to study your designs too closely."

"As I said, this problem isn't impossible to solve. Otherwise, collaboration between mech designers of different ranks aren't as prevalent as today."

The Senior Mech Designer patiently explained the methods that would allow them to work on the same design without repercussions. The Skull Architect was responsible for the main design as the lead designer. As the contributing designer, Ves merely had to tweak some aspects to his style. As long as he

kept the changes marginal, say, five percent or less, Ves would not have to expose himself too much to the new design.

"You can pace your work over a longer stretch of time. A typical Apprentice can easily perform thirty minutes to an hour's worth of work before requiring rest and recuperation. This can be repeated multiple times in a day. You can also wait until the next day to fully recover your mind and work for a slightly longer stretch of time."

"If I can only work an hour or so a day on a higher-level design, I won't be able to finish it promptly." Ves replied.

"With your proficiency, you don't require too much hours to develop a variant with a divergence rate of less than five percent. I am handing complete designs with nearly complete documentation and logs to you! You will hardly be expected to do your own research and experimentation."

"I will have to experience it for myself, but from my experience with working with another Senior's mech designs, I will not be able to make too much progress every day."

The two quibbled over this issue for a bit before moving on to the Skull Architect's demand.

"The price that I can offer for a concise and modern textbook on stealth technology will not be low. Its market price at the very least amounts to billions, if not trillions of coalition credits. The only way a small mech designer can you can make up for that price is if you collaborate with me on thirty of my mech designs! As for the design specifications of an ultracompact battery, its value and rarity is even higher, so my price for that is fifty of my mech designs!"

Ves practically had a heart attack upon hearing the ridiculous cost for the two pieces of knowledge. He might as well sign over his entire life to the Skull Architect and become his slave!

"T-T-That's preposterous! It's inhuman! It will take decades to work my way through so many designs! Do you even have that many mechs in your catalog?"

"Years. Decades. Centuries. It matters little to me." The Skull Architect brushed off his outrage. "If you can pay me in K-coins or coalition credits, then I am happy to accept them. I haven't offered these two valued pieces of knowledge to more than a handful of mech designers, so you should feel honored that I'm opening up my knowledge bank to you."

The opportunity to work on a Senior's design definitely benefited Ves, but it was not as if he could find other ways to refine his design philosophy. The best way to improve his design ability was to design his own mechs from scratch.

"Please, sir, let's be real here." Ves shook his head. "You value my input because of their research and input value. Also, the mech market of the frontier is very different from the Friday Coalition's mech market. The material quality is mixed, but is generally of a far lower standard, something which I am very proficient with. Also, the vast majority of mech pilots are vastly less skilled than can be found in the Coalition. Your pure designs are geared towards elites, not trash. Catering to lower-skilled pilots is something which I am very adept at already."

Ves put forth a position which stated that he held much higher value to the Skull Architect than the man had initially priced in. Though he may be just an Apprentice, if his suspicions were right, the Skull Architect might have gotten a glimpse of the greater depth within his work.

If that were so, it basically meant that Ves possessed something which the older mech designer badly wanted to experience. This gave Ves the grounds to negotiate better terms.

The Skull Architect grudgingly nodded. "Your words have merit, but remember that I have several alternatives. Many mech designers in the frontier look up to me, and I can pick any of them to perform the same of what I ask of you. I have my students to count on as well."

"They are they. I am I. Each mech designer is unique. If those other mech designers and students of yours possessed a valuable quality, then you wouldn't be asking me. As you have mentioned earlier, our design philosophies are diametrically opposite to each other. With how obsessed most mech designers are regarding the pursuit of maximum performance, I don't think you can find a single other mech designer in the frontier with a design philosophy that resembles mine. Let alone that, but their skills and talent likely leaves much to be desired. This is the frontier after all."

The reason why the Skull Architect acted disdainfully against most mech designers who approached him was because they weren't worth his time.

There weren't many mech designers in the frontier. Those that were exiled to this uncivilized region of space usually consisted of losers, eccentrics or indigenous mech designers, each of which came with a different set of problems. An indigenous with talent like Mayra was very hard to come by.

Ves didn't know this for certain, but he could make an educated guess. He was thankful that he took the time to discuss the awful situation of mech designers in the frontier with Ketis and Mayra.

The lack of schools, security, MTA supervision, a readily-available supply of materials and a stable mech market all hampered the growth and proliferation of mech designers. It was at least ten times harder for mech designers to

operate a business here, especially without any backing from the established pirate organizations.

Pirates weren't exactly the best employers either.

The Skull Architect scowled. His face began to take on a frightening aspect. "Do not presume to ask too much. Greed is responsible for the downfall of countless mech designers."

Ves steeled his mind and remained calm. He held his ground and did not show any sign of being intimidated. "I merely wish for fair compensation. My work is of far greater value to you than what the sales of your mechs can bring in. Considering the immense difficulty for me to work on a higher-level design, perhaps working on five designs is suitable."

"Ridiculous! A contribution on merely five of my designs isn't enough to cover the bribes I have to pay! Seventy-five designs, no less!"

A long round of bargaining subsequently took place. Though the Skull Architect possessed an advantage in status, experience, and business acumen, Ves figured out that the older man really wanted to close this deal.

It couldn't be helped! Even though countless mech designers existed in the galaxy right now, only a miniscule fraction arrived at the Faris Star Region. Of this portion, none of them possessed his unique qualities.

His exclusive specialty alone might be unique in this galaxy! With a virtual monopoly on his hands, Ves represented the only hope of solving the fatal flaw of the Skull Architect's high-performing mechs. The Senior Mech Designer practically hungered for his

"Twenty-five designs." An incredibly haggard and angry pirate mech designer said. "This is my last ultimatum. It is a burdensome amount of mechs to work with, and it will still require some decades to work through them all, but this is

an extremely generous price considering what you are able to obtain in return."

Ves paused for a moment, weighing the offer in his mind. He really wanted to bargain down the Skull Architect further, but it appeared that contributing to twenty-five designs had reached the bottom line. Anything less might provoke a violent reaction from this unstable mech pilot. Ves still possessed some scruples about the Skull Architect.

He was negotiating with a mass-murdering criminal after all! It felt like dining with a serial killing cannibal. If Ves attempted to suggest they eat all-vegetarian meals, perhaps his chopped-up body would be served up as the next course!

However, Ves sensed it hadn't reached that point yet. His sense of preservation urged him to accept this figure, but his risk-taking instincts urged him to make one more attempt.

Just do it!

"Ten designs."

"FIFTEEN DESIGNS! NOT ONE LESS, YOU LITTLE BRAT! OTHERWISE, I'LL PUT A BOUNTY ON YOUR HEAD AND SIC MY PERSONAL RETINUE ON YOUR TRAIL AND DRAG YOUR BROKEN BODY BACK TO MY LAB SO I CAN CUT OFF YOUR BONES WHILE YOU'RE STILL ALIVE AND INCORPORATE THEM INTO A COMMEMORATIVE LEINER GREY!"

"Agreed!"

Ves did not ask whether the Leiner Grey his bones would be incorporated in was the high performing base model or the simplified variant that Ves had put forth. The Skull Architect might go through with his threat if Ves kept egging the man on! This was one of the most frightening negotiations of his life!

"Ptah!" The awful-looking Skull Architect spat. "You little punk! It seems you finally know your limits! Don't forget your agreement! Collaborate with me on fifteen separate mech designs, and I will wipe out the debt you owe for obtaining knowledge that you came for. Are you happy?"

"Certainly, sir!"

Objectively speaking, it was a generous offer. Subjectively speaking, Ves was underselling his own uniqueness. To a bystander's perspective, the deal heavily favored Ves. In fact, it could be argued that collaborating with a Senior Mech Designer for fifteen times wasn't a price at all, but actually a benefit that could vastly propel Ves to a higher level!

However, Ves truly believed his specialty should be enough to repay the debt he owed to the Skull Architect after collaborating two or three times at most.

Neither side regained their cheer. Both of them felt as if the other secured the upper hand in the negotiation. The fact that neither side ended up satisfied spoke of a decent compromise.

Chapter 663 Devils Bargain

In the next couple of minutes, the Skull Architect acted decisively once the deal had been reached. He poked at his comm for a minute before he looked up again.

"The documentation on what you came for is being sent through the Tzianti connection right at this moment. I've included only the bare minimum of files on both pieces of technology and cut back on both the duplicates and extremely profound theories that you have no business dealing with at your stage. What I'm already sending should be more than enough to get you by, so don't be greedy!"

"I understand, sir!"

Ves trusted the professional integrity of the Skull Architect to send what he promised. Certainly, if Ves didn't bargain so hard, the Senior may have kept in some freebies, but he got what he paid for. For the price of just fifteen collaborations, he obtained condensed knowledge on two key technologies that formed the essential cornerstones of his future plans.

Due to the low bandwidth of the connection, it took some time for the files to completely transfer. While they could have performed this transfer a billion times faster through the galactic net, that would basically be broadcasting their dirty deeds to the Comm Consortium. Both of them would rather put up with the slow connection.

The Skull Architect seemed less likely to chop Ves up and use his skull as a decorative piece for his next mech now that they closed a deal.

"I am sure I do not need to remind you of the consequences of reneging on your part of the deal. Even your vaunted Master Olson won't be able to protect you from my wrath if you are stupid enough to do so. From what I know of Carmin, she will even take my side! A contract between mech designers requires no guarantee from the MTA to hold force."

"Yes, sir. I have always upheld my contracts. I am not about to break this track record."

"Let us discuss the practicalities of my demands. I won't go easy on you, especially since I only have fifteen opportunities to obtain variants of my designs from your hand.

They got down to the nitty gritty details. As if to compensate for his less-than-stellar deal, the Skull Architect imposed numerous harsh demands and conditions on the work that Ves had to perform on his behalf.

First, the deal needed to be kept a secret from both sides. It didn't benefit Ves at all to be connected to designing pirate mechs. Getting booted out of the

rolls of the MTA and being ostracized by the entire mech industry was virtually guaranteed in that event.

Though the repercussions were less severe to the Skull Architect, his deal with Ves may be construed as weakness since he was chasing after the abilities of an Apprentice Mech Designer of all things. For a pirate designer that constantly needed to project strength, it was in his best interests to keep quiet.

Still, out of the two of them, Ves was in the worse position. In some way, Ves had entered a situation where the Skull Architect could possibly blackmail him by airing their dirty dealings to the public.

The risk was only tempered by the fact that evidence was easily fabricated, therefore Ves could still fight back by doubting the evidence or flooding the galactic net with similar stories. In recent days, he learned the best way to fight an accusation was to flood the media space with as much nonsense as possible.

In the flood of data, hardly any useful information could be found!

Besides, if the Skull Architect had any integrity as a mech designer in his bone, then he wouldn't resort to such an unprincipled method. The man's own warning earlier reminded Ves that Master Olson would likely intervene in person if necessary.

He still enjoyed backing of his own, though it was easy to forget that crucial fact.

In a situation where both sides stood to suffer severe losses if they breached the contract, the best option was to play within the rules.

Ves briefly wondered what relationship Reno Jimenez used to have with Master Olson. A few decades ago, they were both Seniors, and from his own

words they collaborated on some unregistered designs, likely for the Vermeer Group.

Perhaps they regarded each other as peers back then, but now their statuses couldn't be more different. One was a fugitive pirate designer, while the other advanced to the ranks of an exalted Master.

There was a lesson in their divergent career paths.

The Skull Architect quickly moved on to enumerating his other demands and conditions, with Ves occasionally putting in his own requests.

Time became the second-most important factor. The Skull Architect really didn't wish for Ves to take his sweet time in formulating his variants. Each time Ves received a design, he needed to complete it and send it back within three months.

The entire duration of the contract only held for fifteen years. Within this period of time, Ves needed to complete the handover of fifteen variants of the Skull Architect's designs, or else be regarded as a contract breaker!

Ves was expected to complete his work if given a design, but only one at a time. This obligation would be paused if Ves became indisposed due to his obligations. For example, Ves was still expected to travel with the Vandal fleet for a couple of months, and they would certainly be shutting down their quantum entanglement node and maintain a total communications blackout.

In such a harsh environment, Ves gained some leeway.

Besides time, quality was another major factor. This criteria was harder to determine, but overall the Skull Architect needed to be satisfied with the end product. The performance hit shouldn't be too large.

The mech types being considered in the designs encompassed almost every possibility. The only classifications of mechs that Ves managed to strike from

the list of contenders was aquatic mechs and heavy mechs. He possessed little depth in both, and for the former he didn't even master the most preliminary designs.

The only reason why the Skull Architect conceded on those points was because heavy mechs and aquatic mechs never sold well in the underdeveloped frontier region. Setting up an aquatic mech unit was a huge hassle for pirates and the only users of heavy mechs consisted of the larger pirate blocs who relied on their own in-house mech designers.

Overall, the Skull Architect expected Ves to meet every challenge coming in his way without complaint. No matter whether the mech consisted of a spaceborn medium striker or an aerial medium multipurpose rifleman mech, Ves ought to deal with them all with the same level of proficiency he showed with the Leiner Grey.

That might be a tall order to fulfill, but Ves actually looked forward to working with different mech types.

He already benefited hugely from working first-hand with the Leiner Grey! The limited freedom of the previous test provided him with vastly more leeway than he ever enjoyed when he worked with the Inheritor design of the Vandals.

Having worked with two Senior-level light skirmisher designs in pretty great depth, Ves felt raring to go to design his own light skirmisher mech!

Getting a taste of different mech types and gaining proficiency in designing them therefore became a hidden benefit to him. Though the risk was high that he would inherit many of the Skull Architect's design traits, in essence turning him into his second teacher in proxy, the benefits outweighed the costs. Without the guidance of those designs, Ves would have to fumble through each design in an attempt to understand their essence.

The only way to take a shortcut in this comprehension process was to undergo another Mastery process. This might be fine for the first few times, but the ruinous DP cost started to grate on Ves. The things he learned from each subsequent Mastery would be less as more and more of his gains started to overlap with his existing insights.

If Ves wanted to round out his catalog with at least twelve mech models, then he didn't need to acquire a mech mastery for each mech type. It might instead become an easy crutch for him. Becoming dependent on this tool would cripple him if he somehow lost access to it or didn't have any time to go through it in the first place.

For some reason, his profound discussions with the Skull Architect prompted him to reevaluate his entire outlook on mech design. Ves never had any cause to doubt his dependency and faith on his Masteries, but the arguments he heard planted some suspicions in his mind.

A mech designer ought to accommodate mech pilots, but at what point did this priority become a detriment?

Too much coddling turned mechs away from their role as brutally efficient killing machines. The last outcome Ves wanted to achieve was to become known for designing big giant cuddly pilotable teddy bears!

Almost an hour passed before they finalized their contract. They covered almost every term and Ves barely had the opportunity to argue against some of them. In any case, working under these restrictive terms was a necessary price to pay to placate the man's anger.

"By now, the transfer of all the files should be done." The pirate designer stated. "In account of your military duties, I have refrained from passing along a design to you. Do note that the fifteen-year timer starts now, and you better find a way to start collaborating with me on my designs as soon as possible."

Ves nodded. "I shall try my best, sir. The Bright-Vesia Wars have never dragged on for more than five to six years."

"Wars are inherently unpredictable, boy. Don't ever make the mistake of seeing patterns in them. A war that operates like clockwork is no war at all. It is a very lethal form of theater."

"Isn't that a point of favor in its predictability?"

"You see, even the best theater performances can sometimes go awry. Minor deviations in the script happens more often than you think, and there may come a time when the plot is derailed completely."

After that ominous note, they finally ended the call. Ves looked up at how long they spoke and saw that he was pretty much engrossed in the conversation for over two hours!

"Damnit, the total bill for this call is almost eighteen-hundred K-coins!"

That didn't sound like much until the strength of the currency came into play. Each coin was worth more than a coalition credit, so the final bill amounted to more than half a million bright credits!

"The beancounters over at the Vandals are going to be annoyed at this expense."

Still, he got what he wanted, so this conversation was definitely worth the money. Ves drew out an encrypted data chip and inserted it into a slot on the console. A short second later, the files sent by the Skull Architect finished transferring through. He put the data chip into a secure pocket on his toolbelt hanging around his armor and began to wipe away his traces on the console.

He outright removed the storage banks that served as the interface's temporary data storage location and crushed it within his armored grip. The storage banks may have been designed to take a beating, but it couldn't

withstand his extraordinary strength boosted by the servos of his light combat armor.

He considered chucking it to the nearest garbage chute, but held off. His paranoia warned him that someone could intercept the crushed remains of the databanks and reconstruct them from their fragments.

"It's best to hold on to this junk until I return to the ship where I can melt the pieces down in the workshop." He stuffed the fragments into the empty pockets of his toolbelt.

A deal of this nature and the data he just received was enough to plunge this space station into chaos. Ves needed to let as little people know about it as possible, though this would be hard to achieve against the Vandals whom facilities he needed to borrow to build his gadgets.

"I'll cross that bridge when it comes to that. Besides, I didn't gain anything they already know."

Chapter 664 Eroding Peace

Ves exited the comm center with Ketis and his four hulking security escort in a contemplative mood. The others waited far longer for Ves to hold his call than anticipated. Nolsen and the other security officers didn't blink an eye at this delay. Their entire job consisted of standing guard for hours on end when absolutely nothing happened.

"You dolt! If I knew you were taking your sweet time talking with Mayra's mentor, I could have spent my time in the arenas!" Ketis growled as she kicked aside another faulty cleaning bot brushing against her armored feet.

The cleaning bots somehow became drawn to her feet. Ves himself only needed to kick aside a single bot so far. Were they being directed?

"So what did you talk about with the Skull Architect that left you stuck there for two hours?" She asked.

"Lots of important matters, none of it your business." Ves replied absently.
"Let's drop by the bank. I need some K-coins myself to do some shopping."

Right now, Ves needed to purchase the exotics and other materials required to tinker together an ultracompact battery or three.

While he didn't possess any device right now that could read out his secure data chip, he had already skimmed the shopping list of which exotics and rare materials he definitely needed.

To be honest, Ves didn't even recognize half of the names on the list. They were so rare and short in supply that Ves never had the opportunity of obtaining them. These must be strategic materials that were either under the strict control of the states or only found in the most inhospitable parts of the Faris Star Region.

No matter what, he at least gained a starting point.

"So what's it like to talk with the Skull Architect?" She pestered him from the side grabbing his arm as if she didn't care for her appearance. Were it not for their intimidating suits of armor, they might have resembled a quarrelsome pair of brothers and sisters. "I heard he's really moody sometimes. Did he blow up on you? Did he threaten to sic his goons on you and bring your body back to his lab so he could slice it up and use your bones as parts for his next mech?"

"How did you know?"

"Hah! Mayra introduced me to her once and I didn't meet his approval." She sighed at that. "The Skull Architect never really did explain to me why, though Mayra made some good guesses. I still fall short compared to my older sister."

Ves put his gauntlet against her armored back, trying his best to avoid her scabbard. "There's no point in comparing yourself to Mayra. The two of you are completely different mech designers. Agonizing over who is better will only

make you stuck in the past. It's better if you focus your attention to the future. That's the only way to close to gap."

A mech designer always had to accept the fact that better mech designers existed over their heads. Even Masters faced the same prospect when they thought about Star Designers.

As for that last, exclusive group of mech designers, Ves had no clue whether even the Star Designers needed to bow down in the presence of an even greater mech designer.

The two navigated through the busier sections of the space station. The open streets inside a vast cavernous artificial hollow gave out the flavor of a compact city center. The tallest structures started from the deck and extended all the way to the ceiling, giving the interior of Mancroft the strange illusion that they were underground.

The solidity this illusion imparted upon the visitors and residents of Mancroft caused many of them to feel grounded. This was an extremely valuable effect because it distracted everyone from the fact that they were spinning around in space. They were only one or two hull breaches away from explosive decompression.

Most humans couldn't handle long-term living in space. Even Ves yearned to walk on solid ground. Stepping aboard this space station somehow suppressed this hidden fear inside him. For that alone, this visit already paid off.

The space station was a melting pot of pirates, suspected pirates, treasure hunters, those looking to get a job with them, errant traders looking for a bargain and more. An abundance of people frequented the busy stalls and shops, showing that business was booming right now. The unexpected

increase of visitors since last time Ves arrived in Mancroft must have added to the station's current prosperity.

"There are a lot more visitors on this space station than normal." He said as they waited for a small crowd to disperse after noticing Ves, Ketis and their escort. Their combined image intimidated many bystanders into backing off. "Did someone come across a treasure mine in the frontier or something?"

"As far as I know, some pirate group inadvertently leaked the coordinates of a newly discovered star system." Ketis explained, though her tone revealed she wasn't too sure about these rumors either. "Supposedly, the coordinates leads to a desolate star system with its planets baked in extreme heat due to their proximity to the sun. That has given off an intense reaction on the exotics exposed to the surface, baking them in the heat of the full sun for many millennia. Now, they're some of the most heat-resistant exotics available in the Faris Star Region."

Heat-resistant exotics sat high on his shopping list. If he could get his hands on whatever made these treasure hunters mad with greed, then Ves could design a much better ultracompact battery.

"Have the pirates or treasure hunters already returned with a haul?"

"Not here, apparently. The ones who made it back with a haul dropped it off at the nearest pirate stations before going back for another try. The fighting there is becoming increasingly chaotic."

It sounded like the Glowing Planet Campaign all over again, but this time no state-backed military force came in to claim the best ore deposits.

The immediate repercussions of the boom meant that the outfits chasing after the Starlight Megalodon wouldn't face as much harassment from errant pirates. With everyone distracted by the shiny heat-resistant exotic bounty,

who wanted to go back to their old life of terrorizing the shipping lines or raiding a hollowed-out settlement?

The only issue right now was that so many shady outfits had congregated at Mancroft right now to load up on supplies and partner up with others before departing for the treasure planet. This not only crowded the space station, but also ratched up the prices for the most commonly-sought goods.

"Why are there so many outfits in Mancroft?" Ves asked.

"It's because this is the most decent place I've seen in a while." Ketis exclaimed with a curious eye towards all the pirates and treasure hunters walking past each other without more than exchanging firm glares.

"Shopkeepers are more honest than dishonest here and the Boseys are some of the least ruthless station owners of this region of space."

"How worse off are the other pirate stations?"

"It depends on the owners, but none of them are completely safe. Either the structural integrity is full of holes, or the owners don't hesitate to brainwash you into their loyal minions in the case of the Dragons of the Void. The vendors there all charge ten times more for the same products that you can find in civilized space. Mancroft is actually a great destination to stop over for the Swordmaidens as we're some of the few pirates allowed to cross the border."

Ves suddenly understood why the CFA patrols didn't lay a finger on the shady outfits that visited the station orbiting the next planet over. Mancroft was a reward! It served as a safer, cheaper and more convenient stopping point for pirates that had not yet crossed the line into complete depravity.

Compared to squashing down the pirates en masse, only to see them shoot up in the same numbers a couple years later resulted in little change.

However, by letting the Mancroft Independent Harbor operate like now, the

CFA could at least provide an incentive for shady outfits to toe the line and keep their excesses to a minimum.

He still found it strange that the pirates boldly dared to visit a star system that is patrolled by actual CFA warships! That was like placing a police station next to a villain's den!

"Why doesn't the CFA do anything to pirates? So far as I'm aware of, the CFA garrisons haven't been doing anything than guarding their bases and going on sporadic patrols."

Ketis shrugged. "That's what all the pirates are thinking. Commander Lydia once told us that the CFA is in the midst of a major policy shift. To what, I don't know, but they're being less heavy-handed about stomping the pirates and have focused more on suppressing the aliens. According to Mayra, the CFA is busy with the MTA trying to keep the Terrans and Rubarthans under their thumbs."

"That's new. Why haven't I heard of that?"

"Why would I know?" She said in an exasperated tone. "I barely know the difference between the Terrans and Rubarthans. All I know is that this slice of space is in the Rubarthan sphere of influence, but if that's so, I hardly notice anything."

This rumor sounded more plausible than anything else Ves had heard so far to explain the CFA and MTA's decreasing presence in society. They used to enforce their laws aggressively at the start of the Age of Mechs, but after a long period of relative peace and stability, they started to fade in the background. This retreat accelerated in recent decades, with Ves questioning many times why the MTA and CFA possessed all that power but refused to bring their fangs to bear.

A simmering disagreement between the Big Two and the two first-rate superstates had the potential to blow up the entire interior of human space! If fighting truly erupted in the open, then both the Greater Terran Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire stood to lose badly!

"Unless.."

The only way these two mammoth human states could fend off the Common Fleet Alliance was by building up their own warships in secret! Yet Ves could not fathom how they could succeed given the CFA and MTA's omnipotence.

Building enough warships to take on a galactic force required an immense amount of resources, manpower and space. How could they ever keep this industry hidden from the Big Two?

A shudder ran through his back. What if after more than four-hundred years of enduring peace, humanity had started to slide back into their own habits? What if a civil war was brewing underneath everyone's notice?

Nothing of the sort had ever been mentioned on the galactic net or any of the major news portals, but Ves knew better than to turn to them to find out the truth. What he did know was that he only heard a single third or fourth-hand rumor from a young Swordmaiden who wasn't exactly the most reliable source herself!

At some point, they happened to reach a street lined with shops selling mechs. Ves slowed down a bit and stared at the storefronts.

He immediately noticed the difference in quality and emphasis of mechs aimed towards proper outfits.

"Not all of them are good mechs."

The shops catering to the visitors that frequented Mancroft largely consisted of budget and bargain bin mechs. Ves spotted hardly any mech that cost the

equivalent of over twenty million bright credits. The few high-quality mech models on display seemed more like vanity projects that were meant to awe the opposition instead of defeating them through battle.

While this was merely a single street, Ves figured that the other areas that sold mechs offered similar product ranges. "Demand and supply. The sellers only bother with the products that sell the best."

"What was that?" Ketis asked.

Ves shook his head. "Nothing. I'm just noting the differences between different mech markets."

Chapter 665 Sanity is Overrated

"What kind of mechs does the Skull Architect have in his lineup?"

"Well, nothing like this, obviously." Ketis answered. "He's always known for his radically high-performing mechs, though a lot of mech pilots love to complain about them. You can buy five decent mechs for the price of one of his mechs, so he doesn't sell that many mechs. According to Mayra, he still makes a decent killing, and a lot of pirate mech officers favor his mechs. The real reason why he's such a big deal in the Faris Star Region is because he designs some of the best custom mechs that pirates can get."

"For expert pilots? Do the pirates even have those?"

"It's rumored that the big pirate alliances all retain their own experts, but no. At least we don't have any." Ketis shook her head. "Mayra's mentor is merely the best place to go if you just scored big and want to waste it on the best mech you will ever be able to pilot. Each of the Skull Architect's custom mechs have shown off strong fake resonances."

This explained the Senior Mech Designer's success formula in the frontier. With a severe deficiency in higher-ranking mech designers in the frontier, anyone with the ability to design a custom mech was a valued asset to

pirates. Excelling in this aspect meant that some of the best neutral pirates in the Faris Star Region wanted to maintain friendly relations with the man.

This desirability gave the Skull Architect the grounds to remain independent. If Ves had learned one big rule about surviving in the frontier, it was that friendships and relationships worked better than any laws or agreements.

Backstabbing someone was hard if that person could call up a dozen outfits to retaliate!

"How far up does he rank among the top-level mech designers in the Faris Star Region?"

"He's among the biggest hitters, if that's what you're asking for, but he's on his own. Both the Dragon Alliance and the Ravienne Alliance each have three or four Senior Mech Designers on retainer, though that's what they say in public. Every pirate is guessing they are holding a couple more Seniors back."

The two pirate blocs of the Faris Star Region sounded really domineering, but there were actually way more independent pirates lurking in both the Faris Star Region and the Komodo Star Sector. Pirates were notoriously independent and unruly, so utilizing too much force against these fierce and headstrong bunch of people would only provoke a backlash.

Ves counted the Skull Architect among their ranks. If he wanted to, the Senior could have easily taken a highly desirable position at the design teams of either alliance. That he stuck it out alone and tried to stand on his own two feet spoke of his resolve to be unaffected by factional strife.

A pure researcher wouldn't be interested in the pursuit of luxury or wealth!

As the Swordmaiden and Vandals slowly browsed past the mech stores, Ves became increasingly depressed at the mechs on sale. Most of them seem to have been designed by listless, robotic mech designers who designed the simplest and cheapest mechs possible.

And that only applied to the brand-new mechs! Much of the stores devoted more of their space to used mechs and salvaged mechs!

"Is this the kind of mechs that are popular among the pirates and the treasure hunters? No wonder pirates always fold so easily. Some of these mechs are literally walking junk piles!"

"Don't look down on these mechs, big boy. There are three advantages to these mechs that make them worth it. First, they're really cheap, and I mean super cheap. The second advantage to them is that their designs all come with high tolerances. It's extremely easy to modify them, and nothing will break down even if you don't have a mech designer to design proper modifications. The third advantage to them is that they're extremely easy to service and maintain in the frontier. This is the most important point as the frontier is seriously a desert when it comes to places where you can service your mechs."

His low opinion towards the mechs on display reverted a little once Ketis enumerated her points. As much as Ves wanted to close his ears, she mentioned valid arguments in favor of these low-quality mechs.

It was hard. Their designs grated against his design sensibilities. The demands Ketis mentioned imposed a particular way of designing mechs that treated them even more like commodities than they ought to be. Their drab appearances, blocky mech parts and lackluster performance fostered no affection from their new owners.

They were merely mechs, built solely for the purpose to be abused as much as possible before being thrown away or recycled down to their base materials like pieces of trash.

"No wonder the Skull Architect focuses on premium mechs. It's probably unbearable for him to design mechs that go beyond his lowest standards." He muttered.

It also illuminated him more of the Senior's intentions for suggesting collaborative projects as a way to repay his debts. While the Skull Architect was certainly out for the variants due to their research and comparison values, the pirate designer could also earn a tidy sum of K-coins by entering the middle segment of the pirate mech market.

He doubted that any of his variants could be dumbed down to the point of competing with these trash models. However, selling them in the price segments above the budget tier should be doable if he was allowed to replace the more expensive components with cheaper ones.

It was a step in the right direction, but it didn't fully solve the Skull Architect's giant void in his mech catalog.

Since he originated from the Friday Coalition, a prosperous second-rate state in the Komodo Star Sector, Reno Jimenez never felt the pressure to design low-tier mechs. There were plenty of buyers for his high-quality mechs!

The mech market of the frontier was the exact opposite of the mech market of a second-rate state. Thrown from paradise to hell, though the Senior did his best to carve out his own niche in the untamed stars, it remained a fact that his design philosophy inherently clashed with what the vast majority of the pirate mech market demanded.

"Let's go." Ves sighed. "I've seen enough."

The press of people on the streets grew increasingly more crowded as Ves neared the bank office. Something up ahead formed a powerful attraction that drew the visitors of Mancroft like a moth to the flame.

Even his bulky security guards experienced some trouble in keeping the riff raff from coming too close.

"What's going on?!"

"Haven't you heard? A grudge match between Deathless Rowland 'Deathless' Ryke and Sonora Hellvoice' Bridges is about to take place in the mech arena! Hurry up, we can't miss this!"

Ves turned to Ketis again. "Who is this Deathless and Hellvoice?"

"Two famous pirate mech champions from rivalling pirate gangs. The Deathless is from the Castle Breakers and the Hellvoice is part of the Omen of Misfortune. Both of their names are among the ranks of famous mech duellists. I'm a fan of the Hellvoice myself." She replied as she perked up her head. "Can we skip the shopping? I really want to witness this grudge match!"

Ves almost moved his arm to whack her head. "No. Absolutely not. We are here on business, not pleasure, and I have plenty of business to conduct. We aren't here for a sightseeing tour. Our comrades back at our combined fleet is waiting for us to finish our errands quickly and return to our ships."

"Oh, come on, I've been stuck on that boring ship you call a flagship with nothing to do the entire week! I deserve some fun, you know!"

"If I recall, you spent the last week working on the test I've handed out to you. Hasn't tinkering with the Caesar Augustus design been enough fun for you?"

"ARRGHGH!" Ketis practically wanted to tear her hair out right now! "You call sitting behind a desk all week fiddling with schematics and numbers for hours on end fun?! What is wrong with you?!"

Ves stopped and turned to the recalcitrant girl. "I'm a mech designer. Someone who designs mechs for a living. While I understand that many people don't enjoy their jobs, it is one of the basic requirements if you want to

go far in this profession. Let me tell you right now, I have never seen a Journeyman Mech Designer who doesn't love their job! Each and every mech designer I've met that's at least Journeyman is so driven about mechs that they can work for years on end on a single design for fun if the circumstances allow it!"

"T-That's crazy! How can these mech designers stay sane?!"

"You're asking the wrong question." Ves retorted calmly. "The question you should ask instead is if every higher-ranking mech designer is even normal. At some point, sanity can become a hindrance to progress."

Ves left the young woman with her gaping mouth as he turned around and resumed trying to press through the crowd. Ketis quickly caught up but she still appeared stunned by his radical statement.

He had thought long and hard about this matter ever since he first touched upon the Leiner Grey design. Talking with its designer for almost two straight hours had solidified his suspicions.

A good mech designer needed to let go of their sanity.

Of course, that didn't mean they should all bash their skulls with a hammer. The argument that Ves put forth was that great design could only be shaped by extreme beliefs, which in mech designers was expressed by design philosophies.

A design philosophy was a mental construct that contained the crystallization of a mech designer's rules and preferences for designing mechs. A strong, distinct and unique design philosophy could only be formed by strong, distinct and unique thinking patterns.

To put it simply, a boring and normal mech designer would never think of taking risks. Their designs firmly adhered to common sense and did not deviate too much from the norm. Their thoughts and experiences

subsequently shaped their design philosophies into a weak, generic shape that might as well not exist for all the difference it made.

Perhaps this might be the key reason why unadventurous mech designers never advanced to Journeymen.

Normality and common sense served the common people fine, but transformed into hindrances when it came to designing mechs that were outside the norm. For a mech designer to design an exceptional mech, they needed to take risks as well as step outside the comforts of common sense.

That old quote about genius and madness being separated by a thin line rang more true than ever in this theory! Ves even considered them the same thing, only separated by what outside common sense deemed acceptable!

"This may even be the universal root to human advancement!

What separated beasts and bots from humans and their alien rivals? Sentience! Ves believed that Spirituality was intrinsically involved in the advancement of all kinds of professions, not just mech designers and mech pilots.

Whatever differences they may carry, the unifying factor in both was that it required one's mentality to undergo a transformation!

In other words, they needed to depart from the mundane and shift their thinking patterns into becoming something extraordinary!

"Mech designers are like wizards, and mech pilots resemble gods in their evolutionary paths! Different roads lead to similar outcomes!"

This slow and gradual process of retreating from the norm could be regarded as a managed descent into madness!

The key was to retain control over which pieces of sanity a mech designer let go, and which ones they absolutely had to retain!

This was why each higher-level mech designer was so eccentric in various matters. Their unusual thought patterns bled through their normal way of life, and turned them into freaks. Some just hid their abnormalities better than others, but Ves had no doubt that each had been touched with the twin jewels of genius and madness.

"Someone like the Skull Architect has lost grip of his morals, while the rumors surrounding Master Olson make her out to be a spendthrift. That moon-sized Titanium Garden of hers can't be cheap. Compared to them, I haven't even noticed anything weird from other mech designers such as Horatio and Professor Velten."

These differences illustrated that some mech designers controlled their abnormalities better than others. It also suggested that certain mech designers were able to channel their worst sides into more innocuous disorders. After all, between the Skull Architect and Master Olson, casually ordering the killings of thousands was a lot worse than spending too much money!

"If those are the possible excesses resulting from advancing into a higher state, then what is my excess?"

Chapter 666 Frontier Banking

The grudge match between the so-called mech champions of the Castle Breakers and the Omen of Misfortune consumed the entire Independent Harbor. Practically every pirate, treasure hunter, trader, mercenary and so on had a high inclination of being fans of mechs, and nothing excited them more than witnessing a duel to the death.

It was as if the same thing on Harkensen III happened all over again!

Ves ignored the duelling fever growing hotter around him as he pressed his escorts to push aside the bystanders a little further. The poor interior planning

of the space station caused the streets to become more crowded than normal. There were too few routes to the mech arena!

The Vandal security officers had to move exceptionally delicately if they wanted to avoid injuring or crushing any of the clueless visitors pushing against their exoskeleton suits. One wrong move could easily rip a man's arm off his sockets or cave in an entire skull!

"How far is it to the bank?"

"Just five-hundred meters more!"

"Damn it, it will take half an hour to reach it at this rate!"

Meanwhile, Ves turned his mind back to contemplating his recent insights. His latest one happened to sound crazy, but it happened to fit with his observations.

To be a good designer, one had to be crazy!

Every good mech designer he met possessed a lot of depth. Some kept it better hidden than others, but Ves made a bold guess that not a single mech designer above the Journeyman rank could escape this fate!

Not even the Star Designers idolized by trillions of mech designers throughout the galaxy!

When Ves recalled the biographies describing the extremely eccentric behaviors of the Armorer or the Polymath, it all made sense to him. Obsession and faith had propelled these extreme mech designers into reaching a height few humans had ever reached!

If this inescapable rule applied to everyone, did it apply to him as well? How would his fatal flaw look like?

Ves didn't have to wring his mind to obtain his answer. He quickly came to the most probable conclusion. "If there's any negative trait that has defined my career so far, it has to be my penchant for risk-taking!"

Several times now he faced important choices where a rational outlook of the situation should have pushed him to take a safe or normal option.

Instead, Ves acted like an addicted gambler at a shuttle race, and spontaneously put his entire fortune on one of ten racers. With the odds of winning only amounting to just ten percent, it simply didn't make sense for him to place a bet at all!

Somehow, the risks and danger involved enticed him a lot. It threw him into Groening IV, it compelled him to take part in the Glowing Planet campaign, and it was responsible for a lot of unnecessary risk-taking during his time with the Vandals.

Ves craved excitement!

And he couldn't even blame the System on that. Perhaps it had always laid dormant in his mind, but the moment he gained a stroke of sudden luck and obtained his father's gift that allowed him to change his fate, he had been pursuing these moments of serendipity with a feverish breath.

He was being too greedy! He wanted more, and he had a disturbing tendency to disregard all kinds of warning signs in the pursuit of greater profit!

Perhaps in his warped mind, the warning signs had the opposite of cautioning Ves away from a reckless choice.

They instead acted as enticements luring him closer into the abyss!

"Out of every possible negative trait that could have been magnified, the design gods have forced me to embrace the lust for excitement from my Larkinson bloodline!"

Of course, it was pretty dubious to blame his affliction to the metaphorical existence of the Larkinson bloodline. Even within the Larkinson family, many believed their tendency to volunteer for service or seek out other opportunities to prove their courage came from the constant stories their aunts and uncles constantly repeated to the young ones.

Nurture, rather than nature was to blame for their adventurous spirits.

Still, regardless of its origin, the craving of excitement hidden deep within Ves had taken a life of its own. As Ves continued to develop his mind through his experiences and Attribute upgrades, his thoughts grew stronger but also more extreme. While he optimized his mind to design mechs with greater proficiency, the side effects also amplified everything else.

This was the root of the issue. To become a better mech designer, his mind needed to be transformed, and this process was anything but surgical and precise.

Now that he formulated this theory, everything related to mech design became increasingly more sense. The explanation not only explained the eccentric behavior of well-known mech designers, it also offered a recipe to develop a mech designer's mind.

Ves automatically threw a glance at Ketis, who was helping the group push through the crowd. If there was anyone who could test out his theory, it was Ketis, a newly advanced Novice with practically no track record to speak of. She was as blank of a paper as Ves could obtain. Though her personality already exhibited some strong traits, Ves gained the ambition to mold her according to his desired shape!

Instead of designing mechs, Ves graduated to designing mech designers!

The stupendously absurd prompted him to burst out in laughter.

"Bwhahahahaha! What genius! This is brilliant! Hahahaha!"

He abruptly stopped laughing when he realized what a fool he was making himself out to be. It didn't help out he looked like a decked-out pirate VIP, either. Nolsen, Ketis and the other Vandal guards looked at him with aghast expressions. How could their normal and friendly-looking mech designer suddenly display an outburst of madness?

"Ahem, let's continue on. We've almost reached the bank."

By now, the grudge match between the two mech champions already commenced. The arena had already filled up to capacity and refused the entry of those who came too late, causing many of them to be bummed out. It didn't help that the arena was part of the underground, therefore no footage of the battle would emerge on the galactic net.

"This isn't fair! If I came one minute earlier, I would have gotten in!"

"Those stingy Boseys deserve to be hanged! Why can't they upgrade that tiny mech arena of theirs!?"

"Let me in! I'm the Hellvoice's number one fan! I can't possibly miss the death match involving my idol!"

The streets around the mech arena became unruly due to the poor arrangements of the space station. Though the Mancroft Independent Harbor profiled itself as a fourth-rate state, in truth its size and capacity barely matched one of the larger space stations of Bentheim!

The space station had been built long ago, and while many modules enhanced its size and structure over time, it had always been done in the cheapest way possible. The best description of its growth was that it occurred somewhat organically, without any of the long-term planning that characterized most cities these days.

The Frontier Bank of Mancroft was conveniently located next to the mech arena complex. The reason for this was evident, as gambling addicts poured

in constantly to draw out their money reserves and exchange their illiquid valuables for cold hard K-coins.

Of course, the wealthier among them declined to carry around sacks or crates of K-coins and K-bars around them. That would just provoke a savage feast from the surrounding pirates.

The bank provided a convenient vault for them to stow away their processed Kavenit. Naturally, this service came with all kinds of fees and conditions.

The subject of banking for pirates was a rather complex one. In general, many pirates didn't trust banks with their money, and instead buried them under plots of land at some obscure frontier star system.

Even if they stashed some of their wealth at a bank, they could be notoriously violent when it came to fees and such! It wasn't unheard of for them to go mad and raze an entire bank branch because they had to pay a two percent transaction fee whenever they wanted to withdraw their money or something!

For a frontier bank to prosper, they needed to be more circumspect in their profit-generating methods. One of the major revenue sources of the bank was actually their right to confiscate the belongings of clients who turned up missing or deceased without an heir to take over their spoils.

And even if the deceased selected someone else to inherit their wealth, the bank assuredly received their own cut!

Considering how prevalent pirates died in battles or random accidents in space, Ves could see how Mancroft's bank prospered to the point of becoming one of the main revenue sources of the Bosey Clan. It wasn't as if most pirates cared where their riches went after they died!

"Do you have a bank account here, Ketis?"

"No. The higher ups manage all the money. We've never received a salary or anything like that. Serving as a Swordmaiden is enough of a reward."

Ves silently shook his head. The Swordmaidens indoctrinated their sisters well. All of them had been brainwashed into becoming their slaves without their notice!

"Wait in the foyer while I get my money."

Ves approached one of the humanoid bots that served as one of the receptionists of the bank and proceeded to undergo the complicated dance of accessing his locked bank account. Because his money was stashed at several different banks, it took a lot of procedures as well as the assistance of an actual human manager to complete it all.

Half an hour later, Ves walked away from the bank manager's office 2,500 K-bars richer! This was the equivalent of a billion bright credits! Of course, he wasn't stupid to bring all of that exotic metal out, so he stashed them in the Frontier Bank of Mancroft's vault.

"Stupid exchange rate. I think I lost ten percent of my wealth from that alone."

Even in the future, banks still prospered!

There had been plenty of calls to establish a unified human currency, possibly based around especially valuable exotics or units of energy, but it never caught on. Much like how humanity resisted unification into a single nation, they also wanted to maintain control over their own petty currencies. This led to the current smorgasboard of currencies.

"How many currencies are used in the Faris Star Region?" He asked his now-regular frontier guide.

"Independents like us mostly get by with K-coins. Each of the pirate alliances use their own currencies instead, but no outsider accepts them, so they mostly spend K-coins as well whenever they come out of their space stations."

This made K-coins the dominant currency of this region of space, which was convenient for Ves because he didn't have to waste money converting them into other currencies.

Still, there was one more issue puzzling him. "The purchasing power of a K-coin is very high. How are you able to buy something as simple as a glass of beer with a coin that's worth at least a keg of beer?"

"A few pirates stash the K-coins in a bank and let them handle the payments. Most of us simply break up the coins into fragments and pay them by their mass. Every store on this station has a machine that can take a standard K-coin and shave off enough fragments to cover the payment. Still, most pirates are fools if they trust the shops to calibrate their machines correctly. They mostly break up their coins into fragments beforehand and stuff them into their pockets."

It sounded incredibly primitive. Ves felt as if he had travelled back in time to the point where gold coins became the dominant currency of the land.

The repercussions of this backwards currency handling was very clear to Ves. Every pirate was hoarding their wealth, and they didn't easily trust others to take care of it. Liquidity flowed very slowly in the frontier, thereby indirectly depressing the already anemic mech market.

It truly wasn't easy to do business in the lawless frontier!

Chapter 667 Key Materials

The foundation of most pieces of advanced engineering lay in their material composition. Powerful exotics with myriad effects not accomplishable by mundane metals such as titanium and palladium lent their abilities to achieve

powerful effects such as all-encompassing stealth or reaching an unheard of amount of energy density!

In order to simplify the application of mature technology systems, they each listed out recipes of must-have exotics. Without a set number of these exotics in a set combination, the technology couldn't be substantialized.

It was like how someone wouldn't be able to bake an apple pie without getting their hands on an apple.

Of course, one didn't need to follow the recipe strictly if they were proficient bakers. If they wanted to, they could replace the apple component of the pie with pears or berries. As long as the user of the technology knew what they were doing, they could perform endless tweaks on the recipe.

The list of key materials therefore listed out several key materials, each divided into low, medium and high quality tiers. The better the material, the better the performance.

An apple pie tasted better if it was made out of fresh, organically grown apples grown from natural rather than something mass-produced in a cheap, overstuffed greenhouse and then spent months rotting in the middle of maggots and other vermin.

The same applied to applications of any kind of technology. Some of the most crucial pieces of information contained within the condensed data packages the Skull Architect sent over were simple listings of the key materials.

As long as Ves was able to obtain the ingredients, it wasn't a stretch to derive the recipe for an apple pie by himself. Of course, he'd have to spend years baking thousands of pies before he nailed down a good recipe, so he wasn't looking forward to fumbling around in the dark on his own.

Fortunately, while the condensed set of files only contained the barebones principles on both technologies, they were sufficient for Ves to bake at least a

basic pair of pies. For now, the basic-level applications already satisfied his simple palate. At this stage, creating something more complex was out of his means.

"I still have to bleed a lot of K-coins in order to gather all the core materials." Ves frowned. "I'll have to budget carefully and bargain hard for the materials that I want."

For now, he didn't have to procure new materials to reconstruct a working example of stealth tech. The stealth shuttle fragments recovered from the battlefield should have already covered it. Up until now, Ves missed the essential theory to make sense of the fragments, but he had just obtained the missing link, so he was already satisfied in that area.

Now, all he needed to shop for was enough low-grade materials to construct at least three basic ultracompact batteries. "I already invented two little gadgets that hunger for energy. I can reserve the third battery for another gadget, or better yet treat it as a spare."

He mentally tallied the number and amount of different lowest tier exotics he had to get his hands on to fabricate three complete batteries, with a small amount of margin to spare for emergencies.

He grimaced a bit. "Even the cheapest form of ultracompact battery is a money-sucking pit."

There was a reason why ultracompact batteries were considered higher technology, ranked even above the predominant form of stealth technology in this region!

Some recipes were intrinsically simple and made do with nutrient packs, while others were more elitist and demanded the use of quality organically-grown ingredients. The differences in cost was massive, but Ves couldn't do anything

about it. An ultracompact battery couldn't be called that anymore if Ves resorted to lower-tier materials instead!

Right now, his shopping list consisted of three rare exotics that were rumored to show up in the frontier. Since Mancroft was a trading station, it inevitably sold much of the spoils from treasure hunters returning from the untamed stars. Ves hoped to get lucky and encounter the desired materials.

"Ketis."

"What is it now?" She replied, a little ticked off that she was being used as a walking search machine by Ves all day.

"I'm on the lookout for the following three medium-grade exotics: sulomnium, beta-otricine and Flesha's Tears."

Her eyes widened and her breath shuddered at the mention of some of those exotics. "I haven't heard about Beta-Otricine before, but both sulomnium and Flesha's Tears are some of the most valuable exotics you can score in the frontier! Any treasure hunter that manages to stumble upon a couple of grams of the former and a handful of micrograms of the latter has struck the jackpot! Do you know how much they cost?!"

"Why did you think I dropped by the bank? I know how much they cost, that's why I've pulled out my savings. Ketis, remember what you are supposed to be. Every mech designer is a money-making machine. Acquiring a few hundred-million credits is as easy as breathing to me. Journeymen like Mayra have it even better. They can each become the foundation of a large mech manufacturer in civilized space! As long as you work earnestly to advance your mech design abilities, acquiring expensive exotics will become as trivial as shopping for clothes to regular people."

Ves had ulterior motives when he said those words. He wanted to spark her greed. Unfortunately, he saw no signs this particular vice caught on to Ketis.

As a Swordmaiden who had grown up in a primitive settlement only to be picked up by Lydia and inducted into her organization as a teenager, Ketis never dealt a lot with money before. Concepts of wealth and income disparity was as alien to her as becoming an obedient housewife to a lucky husband.

If Ves wanted to corrupt Ketis into the cult of mech design, then he needed to grasp onto another handle.

No human was perfect. The female mech designer already possessed a warped personality by dint of her Swordmaiden upbringing. Ves merely had to stimulate the right personality trait to ignite her passion in mech design.

Their group tried their best to pass through the crowd of mech fanatics and head down into a lower deck which mainly sold industrial materials and equipment. Much less people ventured on this station level, which comfortably gave Ves, Ketis and his escort room to move.

As they browsed through shop to shop, thunderous cheers rang throughout the station. The grudge match had come to an end!

"The Hellvoice triumphed over the Deathless! The man who could not be killed is finally slain!"

"The Castle Breakers are claiming that the Hellvoice has cheated! They're furious!"

"Damn it, their fleet is starting to come online! Let's get back to our ships get away!"

Ves quietly cursed. It was just a mech duel. Couldn't the sore losers swallow their pride and take their defeat with dignity? These Castle Breakers sound like a big deal as well. The damage they could do if they went mad was enormous.

Still, the Bosey Clan wouldn't let some random pirate outfit run amuck in the vicinity of their space station. That was bad for business.

Still, the unrest about the outcome of the duel slowly started to spread towards the fans. Grumbling mercenaries walked past obnoxiously loud groups of pirates celebrating their chosen champion in plain sight.

Eventually, the situation came to a head. Just a stone's throw ahead of his group, two pairs of gangers confronted each other in the middle of the crossroad. The surrounding bystanders and vendors smelled a fight, and scurried away like rats! All the storefronts lowered armored shutters in record time, as if they had performed the same action for decades!

"Ves, I'm afraid we can't go further. There is an incident up ahead." Nolsen stated as his faceplate automatically descended onto the helmet. The exoskeleton guards entered battle mode. "This conflict doesn't have anything to do with us, so I highly recommend we detour."

"Let's go, then." Ves nodded. As long as those hooligans were determined to duke it out, there wasn't any opportunity to shop here. "There are plenty of vendors in this space station. We can always find what we want elsewhere."

Ketis spoke up then. "I've visited Mancroft several times before. I know a few big stores that deal in some of the rarer goods, the kind that is normally left under the counter. The ones with the best relation is Big Dickson's, as they're a branch office of the Delta Grind Collective. Their store on Mancroft is right at the junction of that crossroad over there. The Collective does a lot of business with mines and resource deposits. They're some of the bigger material suppliers in the Faris Star Region."

"So if there's any place that has the exotics I need, it's Big Dickson's?"

"Better yet, if I show them that I'm a Swordmaiden, we can get a sweater deal from them! I don't know how much of a discount they're willing to give us, but I've seen Mayra drive down the base prices by about five percent every time!"

That sounded fairly impressive. Ves did not despise this five percent discount, as when it came to bulk purchasing of raw materials, even a two percent discount was significant! The procurement of smaller amounts of exotics was slightly different, but even there the established traders had a tendency to adhere to standard market pricing.

Considering the delays they might face if they let the two rivalling groups posture around, Ves preferred a quicker solution.

Ketis already started to grin as she closed the faceplate of her own suit of medium combat armor. A silent command caused the sheathed greatsword on her back to jump out of its scabbard and land upon her waiting gauntlets. With a firm grip, she experimentally flourished her sword.

"Let's chop up some degenerate scum!"

Ves quickly placed his palm over her shoulder pauldron. "Hold it right there! Let's not resort to violence if we have to. It's sufficient for us to scare them off. After all, what can they do against our armor and firepower?"

"Pff, these guys are trash." She dismissively declared. "We don't need to waste any more time with them. They won't listen to us. If you're afraid they have backers, they don't look like they have ones, or else they would have boasted about it by now."

The two groups of pirate gang members all brandished their cheap rifles and pistols against each other. Almost everyone wore standard vacsuits with regular clothing on top. Only the leaders wore something resembling a suit of armor, but it looked more like something a drunken armorer improvised together.

Ves calmly held Ketis and the rest back while he looked up the figures before him through his comm. He wanted to be certain of their background before engaging them. If it turned out that both of them were backed by the pirate alliances, then Ves would immediately drop his plan and turn around.

"Hmmm, they don't come from any notable outfits at all." Ves revealed as his research bore fruit. "The leftmost group hail from the Riller Dollar while the group to the right are crew members of the Whisper Current. Both are the names of converted carriers. Their outfits are so small that they only consist of a single ship!"

These kinds of pirates were barely eking out an existence in the periphery of human space. A converted carrier was nothing but refurbished cargo hauler or large transport that had reached the end of their lifetime.

After confirming that neither pirate groups had a big brother watching over them, Ves confidently commanded his security escorts to move up. They brandished their heavy caliber rifles and cannons like they wanted everyone to know how much firepower they could pump out. Their heavy, intimidating footsteps clanged against the deck with so much noise that it easily disrupted the drawn-out argument between the pirate groupings.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please, there is no need for you to act like this at this important junction." Ves stepped forward with his caped and armored form. Surrounded by his exoskeleton guards, he looked like a prince under the protection of a quartet of uplifted gorillas. "I have business with the proprietor of that store over there. If you could please take your argument elsewhere, it would be much appreciated."

The vast majority of the pirates at the crossroads displayed varying amounts of fear and apprehension. The escorts along with his sophisticated words gave them the impression that they faced a bigshot, which wasn't entirely wrong!

Chapter 668 Regressive Society

Pirates were very sensitive of outer status. The more impressive someone looked, the higher their importance, and thus the higher the cost of offending them. So far, it seemed his plan was working.

"Who are you?" One of the half-drunken pirate sergeants cautiously asked.

"I'm an envoy of the 6th Flagrant Vandals. Have you heard of us?"

"Whuh? Who?"

"Vandals? Never heard of them. Are they strong?"

"I don't know. They sound kind of weak if they haven't developed a rep around here."

"Yeah, maybe this guy is faking it. It won't be the first time some spoiled brat from civilized space has come out here to muck around with us lowlives."

Surprisingly to Ves, most pirates scratches their heads or looked befuddled. These lazy bums didn't even keep up with the news! Practically everyone in Harkensen had heard of the Vandals, but these country bumpkin pirates never even caught wind of their exploits! How shameful!

He realized he made a mistake. He needed to speak the language of the frontier! His hand quickly gestured for Ketis to step forward, which she did.

"Alright you boys, scram already! On behalf of Lydia's Swordmaidens, I'll chop you idiots into pieces right now if you don't get your scrawny butts off this street!"

That caught everyone's attention. More than half of the pirates recognized the Swordmaidens by name or appearance. The huge sword held before her loomed against them as if they could already feel their bodies being cut.

The rivals put down their animosity against each other and tread back against the intimidating forms of the Vandals and the lone Swordmaiden.

"I don't think my rifle can even scratch their coating. That's real exoskeleton armor!"

"Hey boss, let's split. We can whack the bastards from the Riller Dollar later."

The pirates from the Riller Dollar and the Whisper Current already started inching away from each other. Against the intimidating newcomers, their courage had fled their nerves like ice pouring down onto their bodies.

All their instincts warned them that they wouldn't like it when they stayed!

However, pirates weren't known for their intelligence. The more drunken idiots swayed on their feet before turning their weapons at the newcomers.

"Hey missy!" One of them called with an obscene leer. "I could use some company in my bed. Can I interest a tough gal like you to come with me? My buddies can come too! Five K-fragments for the entire night, what do you say?"

Both the pirates and the Vandals halted for a second, amazed at the sheer stupidity of that drunken pirate!

"Damnit, he doesn't mean it, I can apologize, I'll pay five K-coins to make your forget about this, is that alright?"

Ketis shook in her armor which caused her sword to vibrate and emit a tone. Nobody knew what she looked like because she slammed her skull-faced helmet shut, but it was obvious she took the insult badly.

"Shut that fellow up before he runs his mouth!"

One of the loudmouth's comrades already started to bash the man's head with the stock of his rifle, but it was too late!

"Hey doll, stop diddling around with those Swordmaidens and come aboard the Riller Dollar! We've got real men in our crew, and I bet that each of them

will want a piece of you! Why, I know at least three buddies who, uh why are you behind me?"

Crack!

The lewd man's skull practically caved in, but Ketis had already gone mad with fury!

"The Swordmaidens are not your whores! DIE!"

Ketis charged towards the pirates, who to their credit responded quickly and shot back. While the crew of the Riller Dollar held their ground, the pirates of the Whisper Current tried to sneak away.

Fortunately for all of them, Ketis was content to let the crew of the Whisper Current go away scotch-free.

"She's too fast! What does it take to stop her!?"

Ketis arrived in front of their group within seconds! With one huge horizontal sweep, her extremely sharp greatsword cut through the haphazard ranks of the pirates, bisecting three of the unlucky pirates right through their waist!

"Weak!"

She had grounds to say that, because her quality combat armor combined with her quick and unpredictable movements simply made the pirates weep! Blood spilled by the torrents as her sword cut straight through flesh, bone and more with contemptuous ease! The casualties quickly surpassed a dozen, and there was still a lot more to go!

Ves stood back while stuck in the dilemma. It was absolutely idiotic for Ketis to go off like that on a perceived insult. It had obviously been an accidental outburst!

"Don't tell me that being prone to violence is one of her negative traits!"

A mech designer wasn't supposed to throw themselves into battle! If such a trait got magnified, then Ketis might not even live past another decade!

"Don't just stand there, help her clean up the trash!"

Upon his urging, three of his guards began to assist. They moved forward in their heavy suits and started unleashing their heavy rifles at full blast!

Explosive bullets started blasting the pirates into a shower of flesh and blood, while the lasers vaporized and flash-heated the body moisture within their bodies to explosive results!

It was a massacre! Even as the pirates broke and ran, Ketis cackled like a witch and used her superior speed to run them all down and hack their backs into pieces! The Vandals, not wishing to leave an enemy to take revenge, contributed their prodigious firepower into mowing each and everyone of the poor sops.

Ves meanwhile took cover behind the corner of a shop. The armored bulkheads had been built with street fights in mind, so they hardly suffered a scratch even with all of the weapons being fired. Nolsen remained with him to guard against any sneak attacks, not that these pirates were coherent enough to come up with such a plan.

"What an awful mess." He sighed. "Is this what the Swordmaidens do for fun? We could have totally avoided a conflict!"

It was too bad that everyone took their posturing way too seriously in frontier space. Pirates depended heavily on their pride. If they let someone walk away after such an insult, their deterrence value instantly plummeted in half!

From this angle, Ves knew that Ketis wasn't being too selfish or hadn't gone mad just because someone mistook her for a whore. At the heart of it, she was simply defending the honor and reputation of Lydia's Swordmaidens.

"This is still a whacky system."

Pirates were pirates. Some of them simply couldn't keep their mouths shut. Pride and dignity forces pirates to make a stand, thereby decreasing the chance of avoiding a fight. Unless an intermediary stepped in to defuse the tension, an escalation was definitely probable!

"The attrition rate among pirates must be horrendous. If they constantly fight at the drop of the hat because of stupid reasons, it'll be a miracle if they survive!"

The bloodbath quickly ended. The pirates of the Riller Dollar stood no chance against properly equipped men and women in armor. The disparity between the two forces was so enormous that even their overwhelming number advantage didn't avail them much.

As soon as Ketis carved out the spine of the last pirate, the Boseys finally showed up. An entire squad of station guards in exoskeleton armor appeared at the crossroads. One of them retracted their faceplate, revealing a worn dark-skinned face which increasingly grew into a frown as it beheld the carnage.

"Swordmaidens. Figures." He muttered while spitting out a glob of slimy spit. It landed on the coagulating pools of blood and blended in the darkening liquid.

"Seems like you Vandals got dragged as well. What's your story here?"

Ves knew that the Boseys must have witnessed the entire events via their sensors, but he knew what was going on right now. While the Boseys were largely ineffectual at stopping fighting aboard their space stations, especially between members of powerful factions, they still had to maintain the pretence of keeping the peace.

Image mattered the most!

Knowing this reason, Ves stepped forward and gave a succinct and neutral summary of the event. While he didn't lie, knowing it was useless, neither did he cast any blame on Ketis. He pushed all responsibility for provoking this conflict on the lewd loudmouth that just couldn't shut up.

The Bosey guard captain spat again. "The crew of the Riller Dollar got what was coming for them. Serves them right for drinking their butts off until they can't distinguish head from tails. Case closed."

With that, the nominal police force of the space station marched off to put out another fire. Numerous incidents had popped up that continued to threaten the peace of the Independent Harbor!

With a flick of her sword, which abruptly vibrated and shook off all the blood staining the blade, Ketis marched back to Ves like a cat who got the canary. "I told you, the Boseys don't care a single whit about spilling blood on the streets as long as it doesn't affect their business. Hell, we're practically doing them a favor chasing them off the crossroads!"

While she may have a point about the latter, as the shops started to retract their shutters and reinforced barriers as soon as the fighting cleared, Ves was still displeased at her eagerness to fight. "Just because these pirates don't appear to have any backers, doesn't mean they can bite us back later on. You killed those people way too easily! If you want to chop someone in half, at least limit your venting on the actual culprit!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say, buddy. This is how we take care of the riff raff in the frontier. Your soft ways will get you killed someday."

He shook his head. "I don't believe that. I'd rather believe that you'll end up dead because you ran headlong into an enemy you shouldn't have provoked."

"Hahaha! That won't ever happen!" She chuckled. "Any pirates who are strong enough to pose a threat to us won't dress like washed-up pieces of trash. Just look at this garbage!"

Her sword gestured towards the gruesome bodies on the floor. Heavy-duty cleaning bots emerged from nowhere and started to drag the bodies and their meager gear to a recycling point. The smaller kickable cleaning bots worked to slurp up all of the blood until the deck returned to its regular rust and patina-marked surface.

"These bunch of people were weak! They deserved to die! Coming here armed with nothing but a bunch of light weapons and a couple of layers of clothes, they had no right to stand in our way!"

"So that's your criteria whether you can slay them or not, Ketis?! If they're clothed like, I don't know, NORMAL PEOPLE, you just chop them off whenever they do something you don't like?"

"No one cares about the trash. Neither you, nor me, nor the Boseys care a single bone about these lowlives. If they wore suits of armor like ours and tote heavy guns in our directions, then yeah, I wouldn't have gotten close to them in the first place. That's the thing, though. In the frontier, we always show off our strength. If you don't look the part, you don't deserve to be treated like the part."

This argument went nowhere, after a bit more admonishing from Ves, he metaphorically threw his hands and gave up. Ketis genuinely saw nothing wrong with what she did. While Ves agreed that the pirates were probably scum that were guilty to various crimes, that didn't mean she earned the right to callously butcher them whenever she wanted. It was reckless, pointless and entirely unnecessary.

"What am I getting into?" He asked to himself.

The more he dove into the frontier, the more he felt the misconception he was travelling back in time. Civilization? What civilization? All pretenses of law and decency for human life could be thrown right out of the airlock! The sons and daughters of the frontier only abided by the rules of the jungle!

And the frontier happened to be the biggest jungle in the galaxy!

Chapter 669 Big Buyer

The noises of fighting, shouting and weapons discharges spread out chaotically in the distance. Even in this lower shopping deck which mainly hosted shops and facilities catering towards technical and industrial purposes, the different bars and watering holes attracted drunk pirates like a moth to flame. And when fans of different mech champions showed up in a single place, bodies tended to drop!

The repercussions of this seemingly inconsequential grudge match between the Deathless and the Hellvoice was much more severe than Ves expected!

"Damnit, what is up with these folks?" He asked while he waited for Big Dickson's to completely retract its barricades. The sheer amount of them protecting the shopfront took some time to stow away. "What's the big deal with those mech champions?"

Ketis looked at Ves as if he was a sandman. "You really don't know? They're famous! They're one of the two biggest names at the top of the duelling circuit! Rowland Ryke, otherwise known as the Deathless, is famous for never dying even during the worst matches of his life! That man is an old geezer who made it all the way to his sixties while squashing mech champions left and right throughout his entire career! He's the poster boy of the Castle Breakers, who are even larger than our Swordmaidens!"

"He's sixty years old? And made it out alive through all kinds of mech duels? I have to admit, that's really impressive!"

Even in the rule-bound sanctioned mech arenas, the average mech athlete never risked their bodies when they started to suffer from the first signs of old age. Retiring in their forties became commonplace and expected for these faltering mech pilots.

"What's even more impressive is his duelling opponent. Sonora Bridges rose up from the Omen of Misfortune like a rocket and beat established mech champions one after the other. Everyone knew she was going to challenge the Deathless sooner or later, but she was still too green! She pilots her own custom mech which have these weird sonic attacks, that's why she's called the Hellvoice. The only thing I can't figure out is why the duel turned into a grudge match. That's a duel to the death!"

"Maybe the Deathless mistook her for a whore and asked her to get into bed with him for a couple of K-coins." Ves morbidly joked.

The joke fell flat, especially since the cleaning bots were spraying some deodorizing agent that wiped away the coppery bloody smell and replaced it with the scent of blooming sunflowers.

"Haha." Ketis replied flatly. "Nah, she wouldn't be provoked that easily. I've been following her career, so I know she's always careful about challenging mech champions above her tier. In fact, did you know I met her once? We're a little chummy with the Omen of Misfortune. Commander Lydia made some deals with them a couple of times. Maybe they'll call on us to back them up if the Castle Breakers start to go to war with them. I can easily see that happen!"

Ves almost palmed his face before he remembered that he would be smacking himself with an armored palm. Something like that would definitely dent his softer features.

He still groaned though. "Why can't I go anywhere without anything going wrong?"

"Ves, this space station is looking increasingly hairy." Nolsen spoke up. "Don't underestimate the capacity for stupidity among the people who have spent too much time in the frontier. While regular people back in civilized space know when to back off and get away as fast as possible when they see an exoskeleton soldier, you can't be sure of anything when it comes to pirates. I suggest we immediately return to the fleet and skip the shopping for another time."

"I appreciate your concerns, Nolsen, but Big Dickson's is almost opening up. If we spilled blood trying to reach this store, the least we can do is enter it. Besides, I'm not returning until I obtain what I want."

It took a few more minutes until the store tidied up its interior and let customers inside. In order to convey the right message, he left his security guards at the entrance while stepping inside with Ketis. The woman immediately walked ahead and approached the proprietor of the store.

"Hey Big Dickson! Sorry about the red carpet on the street. Do you recognize me?"

"Pff, you're that brat who follows Mayra around, right?" The skinny fellow behind the counter replied. "You sure grew up the last time you stopped by here. Slain your own exobeast and used its remains to spiff up your armor and all. That makes you a real adult now, right?"

Ketis glowed with pride, though she still looked a bit awkward interacting with a man by herself. "Yeah. Anyway, I'm here for business. My pal over there with the fancy cape wants to get his hands on sulomnium, beta-otricine and Flesha's Tears. Do you have 'em in stock?"

The thin fellow scratched his messy brown beard and his eyes stared off into the air. To be honest, there was nothing 'big' about Dickson at all. If there was anything about him that was big, Ves couldn't find any sign of it so far.

"I think we recently received a shipment of Flesha's Tears. You're lucky it shipped to us recently, because they're always a hot seller. As for sulomnium and beta-otricine, we've got both of them in stock, though not in any great volume. All of them will cost you an arm and a leg, though."

"I have K-coins." Ves took over from here. "As long as you have the goods, I'll take some off your hands. I need 735 grams of sulomnium, 450 milligrams of beta-otricine, and ninety milligrams of Flesha's Tears, all in medium-grade quality. I don't accept any of that sub-standard stuff."

The experienced Big Dickson nodded several times and eyes Ves like he already figured out what kind of customer he was facing. It helped that Ves looked a bit larger than life right now with his extravagant outfit. "Here at Big Dickson's we guarantee our products come from the finest suppliers in the frontier. All of our exotic products are carefully inspected by bots and by hand to ensure our clients leave our doorstep with a smile! We have a range of multiscanners and mineral scanning devices available for you to borrow if you feel the need to inspect our products thoroughly."

"No thanks, I brought my own multiscanner."

He carried a variety of gadgets on his toolbelt. The convenience of carrying them made Ves grew more attached to wearing these kinds of belts. Not only did it allow him to bring his useful stuff while keeping his pockets and hands free, people's perception of him also started to shift. Everyone trusted that Ves knew what he was doing because he wore a toolbelt. Its effect of enhancing everyone's perception of his competence was the same as if he wore a professional white lab coat.

It was another case of function following form!

In other words, as long as Ves looked the part, the people who saw him instantly believed the role he was trying to play!

A couple of decently-constructed lab bots brought three sturdy alloy lockboxes from the store's vault and placed them side by side on the counter. Various codes and other incomprehensible symbols marked the lockboxes.

Big Dickson retrieved a big decryption device from his jumpsuit pocket and held it onto their surfaces, causing them to unfold in a matter of seconds. They revealed numerous transparent thumb-sized cubes, each of them holding a standard amount highly valuable exotics.

The store proprietor then proceeded to measure out the exact mass for each exotic, transferring them into three larger cubes for transportation. He made sure to keep the exotics within their transparent cubes in order to protect them from exposure and to protect the environment from getting exposed by them. These trace exotics were incredibly volatile in the open.

"Here you go. You can measure the mass, volume and integrity of these exotics yourself. You can also bring a third-party appraiser if you want to verify the contents."

"My multiscanner will do." Ves said and proceeded to scan with his own device. He didn't expect a store that looked as big and respectable as Big Dickson's to pull a fast one on him, but it never hurt to make sure. "Looks like it all checks out, though the volatility of your sulomnium and beta-otricine has gone a little stale."

The store owner shrugged. "That doesn't detract from their uses. Besides, the sample of Flesha's Tears is so lively that it makes up for the other two materials. That should compensate for their age."

The negotiation had already begun.

"What's the price."

"2,372 K-bars."

"What?! That's ridiculous!"

"I've already factored in a friendly discount on account of Lydia's Swordmaidens, but that's where we draw the line. Company policy, you see."

No matter how much Ves argued, Big Dickson truly didn't mean to lower the price he quoted at the start.

From his estimates, Ves knew that while the price was on the high side, it was already somewhat fair. By the time these exotics got shipped back to the Bright Republic or the Reinald Republic, the total price might get jacked up by at least twenty percent or more!

If Ves wanted to be really thorough, he should put this deal on hold and visit some of the other stores that sold the exotics he wanted and obtain their price quotes as well. However, Ves figured the differences wouldn't be too big, as these exotics already carried a somewhat static price.

Another factor that played a role was that Ves needed to finish his business quickly. The Flagrant Swordmaidens didn't wish to stick around in the Mancroft System, and the Independent Harbor itself had been thrown into turmoil due to the aftermath of the grudge match.

Ves felt as if he had entered a ticking time bomb that was ready to explode at any moment!

"Fine. Please put the exotics in a sturdy container like those lockboxes if possible."

"That'll cost you an extra K-bar."

Now that was a ripoff.

"Hell no, I'm not that gullible. Ten K-coins!"

"Five-hundred."

"Fifty!"

"Two-hundred-and-fifty!"

"A hundred! No more or I'll take my luck elsewhere!"

"Fine." Big Dickson breathed out in exasperation. "If you want to bring out a lockbox with you, you'll need a decryption key as well. That's an additional hundred K-coins."

"Oh come on, I'm an ally of the Swordmaidens! Give me a break, please. Can't I get a freebie?"

Moments later, Ves stepped out of the premises of Big Dickson's cradling a heavy lockbox with Ketis following behind him like an eager kitten. She made a few attempts at grabbing the lockbox, but Ves firmly kept it in his grasp. He paid 2,372 K-bars and a hundred-and-fifty K-coins for it all! That was practically 900 million bright credits worth of precious materials, two of which was smaller than a strand of his hair! He was not about to entrust his valuables to others!

His waiting security guards took up position around him. "Do you have additional errands to run?"

"No. This is everything I need, Nolsen. Let's get back to the fleet as fast as possible. I'm carrying some very hot cargo."

"That lockbox is very conspicuous. It's going to attract a lot of unwanted attention if you keep holding it like that."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"We should wrap it around a less conspicuous package to camouflage its value."

"Good idea. I think there are some general stores around here that sells various knick-knacks."

Ten minutes and couple of K-coins later, they left another store with a scrappy second-hand cargo bot in tow. The pony-sized bot carried numerous cheap composite boxes containing neat stacks of nutrient packs.

If there was anything the people on the space station ignored, it was nutrient pack. Cheap as dirt, hard to chew through, awful taste, the list of why people hated them went on and on. Their only merits were that they cost little to produce while containing all the necessary nutrients to survive. They became more palatable if used as raw materials to form imitation meals, but in emergencies that was a luxury they couldn't afford because the processing destroyed valuable nutrients.

Thus, while they were a necessary fact of life in spaceborn environments to the point they were everywhere, everybody hated them. Ves took advantage of these traits and buried his lockbox deep inside the open boxes revealing what they contained on the surface. Not even filthiest pickpockets lifted nutrient packs if they could help it!

"I think that's good enough. Let's head back to the shuttles."

Chapter 670 Bad Be

The group along with their cargo bot trundled along the nearest route back to the shuttle bays. Their progress was hampered by the fact that Mancroft Station's ad hoc upgrades and expansions never planned for rapid transit.

Normal space stations at least incorporated tunnels of fast-moving trains that brought people from one side of the station to the other side within minutes. Other stations, particularly those built within hollowed-out asteroids, allowed

the use of aircars which brought people from place to place without disturbing the foot traffic beneath.

Mancroft had to make due with cramped corridors and a schizophrenic station architecture that changed every five-hundred meters or so because of the addition of different modules over the years. Each station owner had different intentions for the Independent Harbor, so Ves could practically read the history off his surroundings.

Throughout their silent journey home, they passed by thousands of frontiersmen and adventurers, each of them wearing different styles of clothes and armor.

Mancroft was a melting pot of cultures, just like Harkensen. The difference between the two was that the latter hosted more people from civilized space, while Mancroft became a microcosm of what the frontier had to offer.

People grouped themselves around their outfits rather than their origins. Pirates who looked as if they grew up on the same dusty planet acted like enemies against each other as they belonged to rivaling pirate gangs. They eagerly forgot their shared birthplace, and shifted all of their loyalty to their fellow comrades and brothers.

Another noticeable difference between the crowds of Mancroft and Harkensen stood out to Ves. A high proportion of the scum on the space station consisted of men. This made sense to Ves, as the conditions and technological conveniences that equalized the differences between the genders was absent in the frontier.

In a more primitive society, women lost more advantages than men. In a society ruled by the law of the jungle, the physical strength of men alone already placed them in a leading role.

Therefore, while female pirates existed, they formed the exception rather than the rule. Those that did join looked like they were able to take care of themselves. Much like the Swordmaidens, the women who were able to escape the settlements and prosper in the stars needed to be at least twice as ferocious as their male counterparts.

Still, male or female, a pirate remained a pirate. Almost none of them earned an honest living. Even in the remote galactic rim, the sheer amount of commerce that took place constantly attracted robbers, who could easily become instant millionaires after pillaging a single unsuspecting shipping vessel!

Sadly, the glamorous life of a pirate was anything but the unrealistic dramas portrayed. Logistical and practical issues such as maintaining your own ships and mechs as well as keeping unruly, badly-educated subordinates in line consumed an awful lot of time and money.

By the time the rank and file finally obtained their share of the spoils, only breadcrumbs landed in their hands. Perhaps their total earnings didn't even surpass one K-coin!

It was no surprise therefore that the pirates on shore leave at Mancroft all sought to distract themselves from their less-than-glamorous career choices. Some were constantly drinking or injecting themselves with stimulants. Some threw what pitiful money they saved on carnal pleasures or the feeble chance to win more money at the gambling venues.

Right now, their gambling woes became the biggest concern to Ves and his increasingly tense security guards. The majority of the pirates placed their bets on the Deathless, a significant portion even going all in! The stupid pirates trusted the Deathless' of never dying on the arena grounds to double their savings.

Gosh, the sheer brainlessness of these dolts rankled Ves. Hadn't they ever heard of making a proper risk-reward assessment? Couldn't they have one little lick of common sense in them? Just because an event was ninety percent certain to happen didn't mean the remaining ten percent could be ignored!

Naturally, clueless idiots who went all-in on their bets vented their frustrations in public.

"My life savings! I lost all my life savings! I was saving them up to pay for my daughter to attend an elite school!"

"The entire grudge match was rigged! It's a conspiracy, I tell you! Both the Boseys and the Castle Breakers are in on it! They took all of our money in one fell swoop!"

"The Hellvoice cheated! The Hellvoice cheated! The Hellvoice cheated!"

"Everyone who lost out, this isn't the end! Don't let the Bosey goons shut us up! As long as we make ourselves heard, the Boseys will have no choice but to return our money!"

A handful of exoskeleton-suited Bosey guard arrived from nowhere and approached the latest loudmouth in an indomitable march. Their loud footsteps thundered against the rusty deck with implacable force, causing everyone's footing to grow to sense the rumblings come closer.

"Look! The riggers of the grudge match are coming to shut us up! Don't let them keep our life savings!"

"ALRIGHT NOW, THIS MATTER ENDS HERE. YOU, COME WITH ME, YOU'LL BE SPENDING THE NIGHT IN THE BRIG!"

"NEVER!" The pirate who lost everything shouted back and yanked out a laser pistol from his shoulder holster.

ZAP!

Before the pirate could even bring his weapon to bear, a shoulder-mounted electrorod from the Bosey guard captain fried the man to a crisp!

Electrorods were short-ranged weapons that could zap people or objects from a distance. They worked instantly, though required a fairly careful aiming mechanism to ensure the electric bolt it projected didn't hit anything it wasn't meant to. If anything went wrong, it could have easily diverted and hit Ves!

Mech-sized electrorods generally didn't show up in third-class mechs because of the high stresses needed to generate an electric bolt strong enough to damage a mech. The melee version of the electrorods, called electrifiers, did show up now and then.

Ves knew a thing or two about electromagnetism, and knew enough about electrorods that the Bosey guard captain could have opted to dial down the power to a nonlethal setting.

Evidently, the patrol leader didn't want to bother with taking the desperate pirate into custody. Right now, everyone stepped back from the epicenter of the incident as the foul smell of cooked human flesh started to proliferate. They also didn't want to implicate themselves!

"Move along, folks!" The guard captain growled. "Unless you want to join your pal that's smoking like a barbeque, I suggest you move elsewhere right this instant!"

The message was clear. The Boseys liked their space station to be orderly, and they really didn't want to hear about refunds!

This kind of scene repeated many times as Ves and his escorts made their way back through the main shopping streets. The closer they got to the arena, the more they stumbled upon the aftermath of brutal executions.

The reign of terror from the station owners succeeded in cowing the reckless gamblers into silence, for now at least. However, whenever Ves looked into the eyes of the aggrieved visitors of the space station, he saw anything but resignation!

Nolsen noted the same thing. "These losers will never be satisfied until they get a refund or bailout."

"Hmph!" Ketis huffed. "I don't get all the fuss. They placed a bet on a candidate who's strong, but not invincible. Didn't they get their just desserts? It's their fault they lost all their money! Serves them right for emptying their entire savings for a gamble!"

Ves kept a wary eye to his surroundings. The people milling on the crowded streets resembled a powder keg that was about to blow!

"It's not as simple as that, Ketis. Think of how much they worked for to accumulate their savings. It represents months and years of serving aboard a crappy ship, risking their lives to rob a trade vessel, fending off assaults from rivalling pirate gangs and more. Almost literally all their lives had been wasted due to one awful decision. Even if it's their fault for making such a stupidly risky bet, these bankrupted pirates don't want to hear anything about why they are to blame. They're looking for a chance to go back in time, or failing that, a scapegoat!"

Pirates embodied selfishness. If anything went wrong, they were never to blame! It was always someone else's fault! The nature of gambling made it so that the most committed suckers sometimes tended to be the people who managed their money the worst.

Gambling was a pretty dubious way to earn more money in the first place. It didn't surprise Ves that the people who were the least qualified to manage their money often splurged out the most!

And underneath it all, a different threat lurked. The shouting about the possibility that the Hellvoice cheated her way to victory came from the most ardent fans of the Castle Breakers.

If the fans all thought this way, what about the outfit itself?

An alarm tone suddenly rang throughout the entire space station! It quickly cut off, but each and every individual stopped what they were doing!

Moments later, word spread out why the space station suddenly rang an alarm. The Castle Breaker fleet had lurched into action! It abandoned its stable orbit in the vicinity of the Independent harbor and started to move towards the ships belonging to the Omen of Misfortune.

"Not good!" Ketis exclaimed. "The Castle Breakers are larger and better than the Omen of Misfortune in almost every way! The Hellvoice's outfit is going to lose badly if it comes to a fight!"

Already, a minor panic broke out in the space station as worried visitors scrambled to get to their parked space vessels and move them as far away from the impending battle as possible! Even though thousands of kilometers separated their ships in orbit, that was still too close for comfort!

Worse, the losers who were irate at losing their money over their bad bets saw an opportunity. Instead of following the visitors who were worried about their rides, the rotten gamblers started stirring up trouble again, brandishing their weapons and shouting calls for refunds!

"Oh, you fools." Ves sighed, already imagining the carnage that would ensue. "Everyone! Projectiles and laser beams will start flying at any moment! Get ready to fight our way out!"

They pulled down their faceplates to form an airtight seal. Ves retrieved his ballistic handgun from his holster and deactivated most of its safeties. While

the military-issued firearm wasn't as good as his Amastendira, it was a lot less conspicuous.

The others prepared their weapons as well. Ketis unsheathed her greatsword and flourished her naked blade as a deterrent and a threat. Nolsen and the Vandal guards readied their heavy caliber rifles to fire at the drop of a hat.

None of this was their fault. The Flagrant Swordmaidens just happened to stop by the Independent Harbor just as a prominent grudge match between two famous mech champions commenced.

If Ves knew the significance between the two duellists, he would have suggested to Major Verle to skip the space station!

News continued to pour in from the situation out in space. Ves and the others had to rely on second and third-hand information to learn what went on outside.

"The Omen of Misfortune fleet is on the move! They're trying to run away, but they're failling because the Castle Breakers have a head-start!"

"The Bosey Clan's spaceborn forces have deployed all of their reserves! They're holding their ground before their space station, but aren't moving in to stop the fight!"

"Those useless cowards!"

"Did you expect any different?"

The grumbling of the visitors didn't change the stance of the Boseys. Their highest priority was to keep the peace in the space station and to keep it together in one piece. If they intervened in every petty conflict between two rivalling pirate gangs, then they would have lost all of their men and mechs from attrition within the year!

Too many fights erupted for all sorts of reasons that it was better to stand aside than to play the hero!