

### **Chapter 711 Pirates Honor**

During his frequent study sessions, Ves noted something remarkable when he intermittently activated his spiritual vision.

Whenever he perused the headache-inducing research papers, his invisible eavesdropper always flinched and stepped away from Ves. Acolyte Villis proved to be incapable of tolerating the mental contamination that came with reading the highly abstruse texts!

The behavior his spy exhibited confirmed his guess that Acolyte Villis indeed possessed a technical background, and not at a low level at all. She needed to be at least a proper engineer or mech designer to be able to understand some of the profoundness in his reading material.

However, even if she possessed as much knowledge as an experienced Novice or an average Apprentice, she had no way of matching his unique set of advantages!

His high mental Attributes accelerated his learning speed to inhuman levels. His Intelligence score of 2.1 alone improved his memorization and mental calculation abilities to the point where the functioning of some of his brains resembled a computer!

Some old lady from a freaky cult in the frontier shouldn't be able to match his learning prowess! If she somehow possessed the capabilities to do so, then she wouldn't be sent out as a spy, but would instead work directly alongside the Soulless Priest!

Finding out this weakness of her gave Ves a lot more confidence in his plan to deal with her. Any designs, devices and notes that incorporated high-level knowledge became practically inaccessible to the uninvited guest. He felt at ease when he worked on the designs of his new gadgets and the battery that powered it all.

He even began to work out a third gadget that could make use of the abundance of power! The plans for his third gadget only remained sketches so far, and Ves doubted whether he had enough time to finish it before the critical moment arrived.

Still, this observation gave him hope of stopping whatever intentions the saboteurs from the Church of Haatumak had in mind.

Their presence among the fleet could have been benign, but if there was one lesson that Ves learned from the frontier, it was to expect the worst from strangers.

He looked up from his designs. "Ketis?"

"Yes, teacher?" She asked in an exasperated tone while looking up from her latest homework assignment.

The woman came far in shoring up her fabrication skills. After Ves became satisfied that she picked up enough habits to avoid becoming a disaster in a mech workshop, he switched her learning focus to passing on the proper principles of a mech designer.

It was fine if she wanted to stick her thumb at the MTA, but she at least needed to know what she opposed and why it would be a good idea in her case to stick to them or discard them. This was why he foisted her with a bunch of textbooks about the MTA, its history, its basic principles and what they offered to society.

Unfortunately, she hated reading through her assigned reading list. Ves only managed to force her to read through the literature after resorting to mild coercion.

In any case, Ves still had a question that needed answering. "Tell me about the friend structure of Lydia's Swordmaidens. How does it work, exactly? I take it that your gang's relationship with the Omen of Misfortune is close

enough to come to each other's aid when one of you needs help, but what about other forces like the Church of Haatumak?"

"Why do you ask?" She asked while looking at him with a confused expression. The question came out of the blue.

"Just answer it. I'd like to know who we can trust and who we can't if our combined fleet ever gets separated."

"Oh, we have lots of friends, but some of them will only help out reluctantly while others won't hesitate to bring their entire fleet to come to our aid. Mind you, most of the times help comes too late if you are already caught in a battle, but most of the time you call upon as many friends as you can while you're being chased by a hostile force. Once you rendez-vous at a particular star system, you can usually scare away your pursuers when you gather up an entire bunch of friends."

"So it rarely comes down to an actual fight?"

"Yup! That's what our friend network is actually for. It would have been too costly if every demand for help is followed by a costly battle. It's much less risky to just put up a scary front by outnumbering your enemies by at least three to one. And if they're stupid enough to pick a fight while outnumbered? Well, all of us will get away with a lot of slaves and salvage."

"So how do you determine which friends will answer your call or not? I've already mentioned the Omen of Misfortune and the Church of Haatumak as examples. How would they respond?"

"Hmm.." Ketis pushed her finger against her lips. "I'm not sure about the Omen of Misfortune, but they owe us big from last time. They're bound by honor to come to our help when we ask."

"Does honor even exist in the frontier?"

"Sure!" Ketis firmly asserted, though she noticed his skepticism. Pirates weren't known to possess integrity. "It's complicated. Pirate's honor exists, but they apply to very special cases. If we didn't have a code among ourselves, then independent pirates wouldn't be able to exist in the first place! Still, we only make friends with the one we can trust. Those Haatumak worshippers for example. I don't know anyone who trusts them. They're wealthy though, and they offer a valuable service to anyone that pays, so they trade a lot but mostly stay out of fights."

Ves nodded in understanding. "So the main way they interact with other pirates is through transactions. Do they have any allies at all?"

"They don't as far as we know. If they suddenly went broke and their anti-sandmen blessing stops working, their escorts would abandon them in a heartbeat. They're far too creepy to make any real friends."

This only underscored their possible threat to the Flagrant Swordmaidens. The problem was that Ves couldn't figure out a way to eliminate them completely from their entire fleet.

Part of what made them so threatening was that their unique means of stealth left them completely hidden from everyone's perception. Ves didn't have any other means of exposing them except for resorting to his spiritual vision.

At most, he'd be able to eliminate the parasites aboard the Shield of Hispania, but where did that leave them with the rest of the combined fleet? He knew for certain that there was a bunch of hidden Acolytes aboard the Jaded Sword, the flagship of the Swordmaidens, and possibly many other ships as well.

If worse came to worst, Ves would only have the opportunity to save himself and possibly the Shield of Hispania if he acted quickly enough. If the other hidden Acolytes had orders to be ruthless, then they could possibly massacre the entire crew of the ship they were hiding aboard!

The fear of this possibility constantly weighed on his mind, especially once the Acolytes found out what kind of treasures they could delve from the wreck of the Starlight Megalodon.

Instead of fretting over the issue, Ves channeled his fear into accelerating his work and studies. Fear was a powerful motivator in the right circumstances, but it took a formidable will and an intense amount of discipline in order to harness it without getting overwhelmed.

The last thing Ves could afford was to lose control!

Therefore, he diligently studied and performed his duties until he rushed through the design of his future gadgets.

At this stage, his design had reached the point where further improvements required diving into far more complicated theories that simply wasn't worth his time at this time.

He faced the perennial problem of diminishing returns where achieving his next goal was more trouble than it was worth.

If he wanted to increase the maximum capacity of his batteries by a single percent, he'd have to pour in thousands of hours in studying extremely dizzying research papers that only genuine experts in the field

"These designs are as good as they can get."

That meant he was ready to fabricate them and piece them together. A thrill of excitement ran through his spine at the thought of realizing these ambitious designs. The amount of tech poured into the ultracompact batteries and the accompanying signal jammer and stealth detector as well as the use of expensive exotics made them worth at least several billions of credits!

"I can earn a fortune in money just by selling them on the black market! It's even better if I can find a reliable supplier of sulomnium, beta-otricine and Flesha's Tears!"

Despite the awesome money-making potential in selling his batteries, Ves did not even think of setting up a clandestine production operation. Not only would it distract him from his main occupation of designing mechs, it also put him at an incredibly amount of risk!

"All of those powerful suppliers of single-use ultracompact batteries won't be happy if I crash into their exclusive market. With the amount of money they're earning from their current trade activities, they can easily stomp me out regardless of how careful I act."

Ves already learned a bit on how the black market operated. The suppliers mostly consisted of cartels and other powerful organizations that didn't hesitate to kill in order to preserve their market share. It was best for him to avoid rocking the boat.

Besides, he should already be glad of his gains. He became completely independent from those suppliers. And because he mastered the underlying theories and some of the well-supported beliefs instead of a single ready-made blueprint, Ves possessed the capability to design many different kinds of batteries that excelled in different applications.

As long as Ves gained enough exotics, he could even fabricate a monstrous energy cell that could power a mech for weeks or months by itself!

"Such mechs are probably prevalent in the galactic heartland, but extremely rare in the galactic rim."

That also made it troublesome for him to actually produce such an energy cell. Not only would he have to spend hundreds of billions of credits to pay for all of

the raw materials, the finished product simply attracted too much attention to be used on the field.

All of these burdens and caveats restricted him from employing his unique and extremely valuable gains for commercial ends. It also explained why Senior and Master Mech Designers such as the Skull Architect might have access to this knowledge but didn't actually do anything public with them. They faced too much pressure and too many restrictions to commercialize this kind of knowledge!

"Still, just because they can't apply their knowledge to their sellable products doesn't mean they can't use it for themselves. I bet the Skull Architect is armed to the teeth with high-powered weapons and gadgets he crafted for his own ends."

Bursting with enthusiasm, Ves invited Ketis to go accompany him down to the workshop deck. The Swordmaiden mech designer followed him with a confused expression. What kind of torturous assignment did Ves cook up for her this time?

Once they reached a private workshop enclosure that Ves had cleared in the schedule before, he explained his intentions to Ketis.

"Today I'm not expecting you to do anything. You've seen me puzzling over a couple of extremely advanced gadget designs, right?"

"Yeah. What are you trying to make, teacher? I took a long look at them and don't understand anything at all no matter how much I stare."

Ves found that to be interesting. As a Novice Mech Designer who barely reached the threshold to call herself that, her knowledge base was far too shallow to touch upon the tech he worked on. She was no different from a cavewoman staring at a blueprint of a trebuchet. The technological gap was so wide that she wasn't at risk of suffering from mental contamination!

"Sometimes stupidity is a blessing."

"What did you say?!" Her eyes grew heated and her nostrils fumed. "Say that to my face if you dare!"

### Chapter 712 New Gadge

After belatedly calming down his student after uttering his faux pas, Ves proceeded to prepare for one of the most advanced fabrication sessions he had ever started in his life.

The difficulty surrounding this fabrication run exceeded the time where he initially fabricated the first production copies of the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord. It exceeded the frantic, time-constrained rush jobs of putting together functional competition mechs within a matter of hours or days.

If Ves had to quantify the difference, then he'd estimate the difficulty of fabricating his new gadgets at six times the difficulty of fabricating his first Crystal Lord!

It sounded ridiculous to say that a full-scale mech was much easier to make than a couple of tiny electronic doodads, but the scale made a big difference. Ves trained a lot with handling big machinery and huge components that weighed several tons. He hadn't trained as much with piecing together fine, miniscule components that all needed to be assembled into place with razor-thin precision.

He recently forced Ketis to become accustomed with working with small-scale machinery by hand to make up for her shortfall, but Ves suffered from the same problem.

Of course, Ketis only needed to craft together some cheap miniature mechs with no practical value.

Ves on the other hand planned to create batteries and gadgets with an estimated market value of at least several billion bright credits!



He could still botch the fabrication of his improved high-powered gadgets because he could always raid the Shield of Hispania's inventory for replacement materials. Even if he failed ten times in a row, all he would suffer was another rebuke from Major Verle or Lieutenant Commander Soapstone.

As for the ultracompact batteries? Ves killed his way out of the Mancroft Independent Harbor to secure up to a billion credits worth of exotics to secure the three key materials! Once he processed them, they became virtually impossible to recover without advanced lab equipment.

It was a good thing he obtained enough batches of materials to leave him with an extra opportunity.

He had three tries to fabricate an ultracompact battery. At a minimum, he needed to succeed at least two times, but his future plans would go a lot smoother if he had a spare.

"Ketis."

"Yes, teacher?"

"What I'm about to craft is some of the most advanced piece of tech in the entire combined fleet. I don't think there is anything on our vessels, including the FTL drives, that matches the complexity of what I'm about to make. The only exception to this rule is the Parallax Star, the custom lancer mech of our useless expert pilot.

"So that's why I can't understand those design schematics." Ketis muttered while looking at Ves like he was a god. "Is it alright for me to stay here? I'm not disturbing you, am I?"

"That's not the case. In fact, it's the opposite. I trust you to watch my back." And he meant that, literally. "I'd like to you unsheathe your sword and be ready to chop up any intruders. What I'm about to make is so delicate that I

can't afford to be distracted by ANY disturbance. I want you to be the person who insures I can work uninterrupted for hours on end."

"How long do I have to stand guard?"

"Not too long, Ketis. Twelve hours, maybe."

"Sounds doable. I've been through worse training exercises."

She did as instructed. With both of her hands resting on her greatsword, she looked ready to snap to her feet and attack anything that intruded upon them. Nobody should enter. Ves already reserved the entire enclosure and warned Chief Haine to not let anybody pass through the solid barriers that Ves ordered the mech technicians to erect.

The fabrication job he was about to run was so sensitive and critical that Ves not only reserved the best 3D printer on the Shield of Hispania, he also fabricated a custom set of precision gear.

The standard-issue precision tools that Ketis used to put together her miniatures failed to satisfy him. They left too much room for error, and their vaunted precision only counted for so much.

That was why he pulled the blueprints from the ship's database and spent some time in the workshop to fabricate them one by one, making sure that each of them were perfect.

That he went through all of this effort just to prepare for the main fabrication run illustrated the immense challenge of what he intended to create.

He also timed the occasion right. The fleet had recently transitioned into FTL and several hours passed by without incident. If everything went as planned, it took at least two days to reach the destination star system.

Practically the only measure that Ves hadn't utilized was to make full use of his Spirituality.

He thought about it, but lacked the confidence to employ it correctly on a tiny gadget as opposed to a full-sized mech. The X-Factor worked by enhancing some kind of intangible quality of mechs whenever a mech pilot interfaced with them. Without this man-machine connection, what was the point of the X-Factor?

Therefore, Ves did not think it would be appropriate to instill an image in his gadgets. At best, it did nothing substantial, but at worst it screwed up its workings in unpredictable ways. He should have experimented with such outcomes beforehand, but he lacked the time to do so.

Still, while he considering employing his Spirituality in an active way to be too risky, there shouldn't be too many risks if he employed them passively. Merely affixing a faint notion of reliability or some other attribute that reinforced their workings might have a tiny influence in their effectiveness.

Ves presumed that this might be the way to go with employing his Spirituality on non-mech machines, but he needed to experiment with it later to be sure.

"I've already pushed so many priorities to 'later', so adding one more item on my to-do list won't hurt."

The more he saw the galaxy, the more he saw that mech designers needed protection. Besides hiring bodyguards, their best means of protecting themselves was to leverage their considerable engineering abilities to design and fabricate their own personal gear.

Why enter a gun store to purchase a shiny new weapon when mech designers possessed more than enough skills to make their own?

Why hire armorers to fashion custom sets of armor when mech designers could easily fabricate a suit of armor themselves?

Certainly, a mech designer wouldn't be able to match genuine gunsmiths and armorers in their degree of specialization and mastery in the craft.

If a mech designer wanted the best, they hired an expert.

Yet if they wanted something they could entrust their lives to, they crafted it themselves.

There was enough overlap between their professions that mech designers only needed to study some supplementary textbooks in order to become adequate enough in fashioning personal equipment for themselves and their closest confidants.

"Do you really think anyone will be stupid enough to interrupt you?" Ketis suddenly asked. "Back at the Jaded Sword, no one messes with Mayra when she's closing up to complete a sensitive project."

"It's just a precaution." He waved his hand in a casual manner, belying the amount of care he truly put on this issue. "After seeing how stupid pirates can be at Mancroft, I don't dare to underestimate anyone's lack of common sense. Even if my fellow Vandals are better than that, in a project like this it's prudent to pull out all the stops."

What he couldn't mention to Ketis was that he did not employ her to guard against his fellow Vandals. Chief Haine should have been smart enough to prevent anyone from coming close, let alone intrude in his workplace.

Ves suppressed the impulse to glance at his back. In truth, he wanted to guard against the entity stalking behind his back. According to his other senses, Ves vaguely estimated that Acolyte Villis had already taken a few steps back.

Since Ves was about to embark on realizing his gadget designs, it was too dangerous for her to observe his work directly. She possessed just enough knowledge to understand the profoundness hidden within.

He grinned.

"Stand closer to me. You can follow my actions more closely then. Just don't get in my way if I move."

Once everything fell into place exactly the way he wanted it, Ves began his fabrication run.

Because he intended to fashion a series of small, handheld devices and parts, he still needed to become accustomed to working at this scale. Rather than start with the batteries which he really couldn't afford to mess up, he instead began to fashion his revised versions of his stealth detector and the signal jammer.

The stealth detector came first. Ves derived the tech for this device from the central database some time ago, and since then he spent a few hours brushing up on the literature and blueprints.

In simple terms, the device transmitted a bunch of unusual waves and vibrations and hoped at least one of them echoed back, preferably something invisible. Regular stealth tech countered many different detection methods, but it was impossible for it to counteract every possible method.

Therefore, what Ves had built was just a fancy radar-like device. Most of the complexity involving the stealth detector came from the delicate sensor arrays that needed lots of shielding and the sheer amount of power running through its circuits. Besides that, the design really wasn't complicated at all.

Ves worked quickly. Within two hours, he worked briskly and with confidence. It didn't take too much time to piece the device together because it was small and made out of very few parts. The biggest issue he encountered was that he still needed to become accustomed to his new tools.

"Complete!"

The device hardly different from his old stealth detector. He deliberately kept its cheap, makeshift appearance the same in order to camouflage its actual worth.

Ves took out his old stealth detector and placed it side by side to his new one.

"They look exactly the same." Ketis pointed out the obvious.

"That's only their outward appearance. Their insides are completely different."

He took out the standard-issue battery from his old gadget and placed it into his new one. Ves still stuck to the same socket standard so that Ves could make use of both his ultracompact batteries or his regular batteries if needed.

Once he slotted in the battery, he turned on the device. The stealth detector booted up normally and its internal diagnostics found very few issues that he needed to take note of. It worked!

After carefully checking over its performance, Ves shut it off and returned the standard battery back to his old device. He placed them aside and began to work on his next gadget.

Fabricating the signal jammer turned out to be a lot more complicated than his previous gadget. He outright failed in fabricating some of the most delicate parts. Even then, he also botched the assembly a few times, breaking a couple of critical parts.

Fortunately, Ves brought some spare materials along so he fabricated some new parts to make up for his failures. He'd rather fail now than later when he finally tackled the ultracompact batteries.

Besides these potentially devastating snags, the signal jammer came out fairly well at the end. Though its quality hadn't exactly met his standards, once he activated it and ran through some tests, he became satisfied that every function at least performed somewhat according to his expectations.

The important point was that the gadget came out in working condition and that he made a fair number of mistakes that he definitely wouldn't be repeating for his next and most important job.

He took an hour-long break to regain his energy and his spirits. He spent the time productively by explaining some of the methods he made use of today.

Once an hour had passed, Ves retrieved a secure alloy cube. Contained within were his three key materials. All this time, he never once touched its contents, afraid that he would ruin them somehow.

No longer. This was the time he put one billion credits worth of exotics to good use.

"Watch closely, Ketis. I'm going to show you how to create a tiny component that's worth as much as a dozen mechs!"

### **Chapter 713 Godly Batteries**

The jump in difficulty from fabricating a couple of gadgets to fabricating a handful of batteries was immense. These weren't regular batteries but ones that stuffed an incredible amount of energy in a package around the size of a couple of K-coins!

Ves respected the intricacy of the tech he only gained a rudimentary mastery from a fragmentary collection of research papers. He suspected that the Skull Architect who provided them to him likely never expected him to come so far after only a single month of intensive studying.

Everything the Senior handed over to Ves consisted of a treasure hiding behind a trap. It must have been some sick game to the Skull Architect to witness greedy mech designers become ruined after they sought to master knowledge beyond their ken.

However, once Ves succeeded in avoiding the many pitfalls hidden within the gifts, the merits became evident. His gains in the field related to ultracompact

batteries and energy storage enabled him to design the most suitable battery of this nature that fit his exact circumstances.

Taking into account his relative lack of experience with working with this tech, he designed the battery with as much room for error as possible. Even if a single part went a little askew, it wouldn't ruin the entire component and send over three-hundred million credits worth of exotics out of the airlock.

Naturally, the increased tolerances came at a hefty cost. Its maximum capacity received a severe hit. This in turn lessened its overall longevity as the battery ran out faster, forcing Ves to recharge it more often.

Ves willingly accepted this tradeoff. He would rather increase his chance of succeeding with an inferior product than risk ending up with an expensive pile of scrap in a race for perfection.

Right now, he did not qualify for perfection. Getting them barely to work was the best he could hope for. In fact, if he wasn't in such a hurry, he would have wanted to spend an entire year before embarking on this project. Too bad time was one of a mech designer's scarcest resources.

There was always work to be done but so little time to complete any!

Fortunately, Ves already became accustomed to compromising on his standards and principles. Putting together an abomination of an ultracompact battery that barely deserved to be called as such offended his sensibilities but met his needs.

If Ves had to choose between pride and necessity, he'd always go for the latter.

His circumstances were far from ideal, yet what other choice did he have than to play with the cards he'd been dealt?



Powering his gadgets with anemic standard-issue batteries was as effective as stabbing someone with a fork. If he really wanted to kill someone, he needed to create the right tools and forge something like Ketis' greatsword.

A supercharged stealth detector enabled him to overpower weaker applications of stealth or enhance its effective detection range by up to a hundred meters! A supercharged signal jammer would be able to block nearly anything except quantum entanglement nodes within a similar effective range!

And if Ves succeeded in producing a spare battery, then he already had a very nasty gadget in mind to make use of its considerable power.

"Let's begin."

After crafting together two gadgets in a row, he recalibrated his precision gear, both to offset anything that went out of alignment, and to correct a faulty setting that he hadn't noticed beforehand until he made use of it. Thirty minutes later, he began to work.

The actual energy storage components were so tiny that they could easily rest on top of his fingernail. Even then, the actual subcomponents that held all of that energy was even smaller.

However, because it was so small, it needed to be reproduced in a near-perfect condition. Any single error might very well result into a catastrophic discharge that would unleash so much energy that it could easily fry him to a crisp, armor or not!

Therefore, the housing basically consisted of various safeguards that mitigated all the potential risks that such a disaster might occur. Many batteries and energy cells adopted similar structures due to the amount of energy they carried.

In order to warm himself up and to verify whether he calibrated his tools correctly, he fabricated and partially assembled the housing first. All of his

progress so far enabled him to pick up a few more tiny faults that he subsequently corrected midway.

It didn't take too much time to finish the housing. He set the semi-assembled shell aside and began to work on the most critical portion of this job.

"Here goes."

Ves started with a couple of hundred grams of sulomnium. This was the main ingredient of the chemical substance that stored all of the electrical energy. He treated the sulomnium and blended it with precisely-weighed samples of junk exotics and mundane elements, taking care to verify he performed each step correctly.

He ended up with something the size of his fingernail that could potentially store as much energy to power a mech for a minute or more.

However, in this state, if Ves started to charge it with electrical energy, it would instantly become volatile and blow up in his face, potentially melting everything in a radius of a couple of meters!

"I'm only a third of the way done."

This was where beta-otricine came in. Beta-otricine saw frequent use in all kinds of components that depended on large amounts of energy because it exhibited the rare and vital property of reducing its volatility. In the right circumstances, it could even tame a lightning bolt and turn it into a static entity!

Ves blended in the beta-otricine into his product, which reduced its restlessness when charged. An added benefit to introducing the beta-otricine was that it also reduced the scope of a catastrophic discharge if something went wrong!

However, rather than stabilizing the chemical substance, it grew increasingly more agitated. That was because sulomnium and beta-otricine did not get along with each other!

Ves had a limited window of opportunity to apply a stabilizing agent that forced these two incompatible exotics to accept each other's presence or at least pretend they didn't exist.

"Flesha's Tears."

This exotic easy turned into a liquid form when treated, which Ves subsequently added to the agitated substance. Instantly, the mixture ceased to stir around, becoming an ocean of calm where the three different key materials all got along with each other like three unfamiliar roommates sharing a single apartment.

As Ves carefully studied the finished substance under a powerful scanner, he observed that the roommates didn't entirely get along with each other, but they hadn't resorted to violence at least.

"Barely successful. I made a mistake in the design. The proportions are slightly off!"

He made a mistake, but not a major one. He already took note of it and figured out he needed to apply a little less sulomnium next time in order to increase the overall stability of the end product.

But first, he finished what he started. He housed the substance along with a number of other important subcomponents into a multi-layer housing tough enough to withstand a small number of rifle rounds!

The battery was so dense that it could easily cave in someone's skull when thrown!

A sense of accomplishment ran through his body once he realized he actually completed a battery that others would kill to obtain! The magnitude of this success couldn't be overstated. Just this invention alone propelled him over the heads of nearly every Apprentice and Journeyman Mech Designers in existence!

"Is that it?" Ketis asked once she noticed that Ves started to relax while staring at his finished product. "That's the fancy battery you've been obsessing over ever since we left Mancroft?"

"Yup. Don't underestimate this little puck. If I slot it into a laser pistol, I can shoot all day with it as long as it doesn't overheat. This is the real deal. If they weren't so expensive to make, I'd incorporate them in every mech I sell."

"You haven't tried it, right? Let's see if it works!"

"I was just about to do that."

Testing the battery took some time. First he needed to charge it. Ves hooked it up with a power source but charged it extremely slowly, monitoring the telemetry every second of the way. He slowly cranked up the charging rate, but never dared to surpass a certain rate. The longevity of the battery suffered if too much power transferred back and forth.

When Ves slotted the minutely-charged battery into a testing device, he stepped far away and proceeded to see whether the battery discharged its energy at a controlled rate.

The testing device set off a number of lights.

"It works!"

The battery behaved as he intended to. No significant problems popped up during its operation, and while that didn't mean that it was completely safe,

Ves settled for the results. Further testing would likely prove redundant while taking up too much time that he still needed to spend on his other side project.

"Since I'm on a roll, I better finish the other two batteries.

The first time was always the most difficult attempt. That he succeeded on the first try should be a good sign for his subsequent success.

Still, he almost botched the job on his second try. As soon as Ves added the beta-otricine to the sulomnium-based substance, the entire mixture started to shake and bubble like a witch's brew gone berserk!

Ves hastily recovered by dumping in the Flesha's Tears after he hastily processed it, which barely managed to rescue over three-hundred million credits worth of exotics!

"Damn, what went wrong this time?"

He waved around his multiscanner in every direction and employed the larger scanner as well.

The answer turned out to be a phenomenon that he had never foreseen.

For some reason, the entire vicinity came under influence to some kind of energy field that had built up during the course of his first attempt at crafting the battery. The reaction that resulted from putting sulomnium and beta-otricine together evidently generated strange forms of energy that lingered in the surrounding air.

The energy field of remnant energies might not have affected his first try, but it definitely exacerbated the agitation that resulted from his second attempt!

Ves fumbled around a bit to get rid of the remnant energy field. He finally found a solution by waving a plain rod of metal back and forth. It somehow sucked up the unidentified energy in the air and turned his workspace back to normal. After chucking the rod into a chute that brought it to a junk pile, he

resumed the assembly of his second battery and completed it without further incident.

Several hours later, he completed his third battery in its best state yet. He repeated none of the mistakes he made in the previous attempts, and nothing unforeseen popped up this time. After using up his entire stock of sulomnium, beta-otricine and Flesha's Tears, he finally succeeded in achieving his greatest goal!

Completing three completely functional ultracompact batteries!

"Wow!" Ketis admired the batteries from a distance. She didn't dare touch the objects or get close to them in fear of ruining them for some reason. "From the way you fussed over this project all this time, I would have expected you to fail at least once."

He chuckled a bit. Looking back on his behavior, he certainly went overboard in terms of his preparations. "You can never be too careful when you are working with components that have the potential to carve out a hole in the hull of our ship. Besides, I really don't want to waste my hard-earned cash."

Putting together the batteries demanded the utmost of his concentration and skill. However, because it was so small and simple, Ves only needed to focus on successfully completing a small number of critical steps.

If Ves attempted to craft something more complex like an expert mech, then he might have to accomplish a perfect result for over a thousand steps! Even he wouldn't be able to accomplish a perfect track record in such conditions!

"Well, this should be the end of it." He sighed, feeling incredibly drained now that he relaxed his mind. "Let's pack everything up and get something to eat. I hope you haven't been staring for nothing, because I'm going to quiz you on some of the methods I've demonstrated."

"Noo!"

## Chapter 714 Why Does It Matter?

In the proceeding day, Ves carefully tested out his supercharged stealth detector and signal jammer. Well, he merely tried them out in combination with his new ultracompact batteries. Because he couldn't flood the ship with potentially damaging energy fields, Ves merely the output of his supercharged gadgets to a fraction of their potential.

For the stealth detector, Ves didn't have any working samples of stealth tech available to test its functioning. However, the readings all looked promising. The high-quality materials that Ves had utilized in its second iteration insured the entire device didn't blow up when subjected to so much power.

One outcome that Ves had predicted despite his hopes was that the stealth detector didn't work at all on his uninvited guests. He started testing the stealth detector well outside its effective range, but slowly moved within its area of effect, ostensibly to confirm that it posed no threat to human bodies, but what he really wanted to do was to drag in his persisted stalker.

No dice.

The invisible and perhaps intangible form of Acolyte Villis proved that his stealth detector didn't do squat against the Church of Haatumak's form of stealth.

Interestingly enough, when Ves activated his spiritual vision, he observed nothing visible emanating from his device. It didn't possess the capacity to affect anything on a spiritual level.

He needed to correct this deficiency in the future, though he had no clue where he could obtain the relevant knowledge to achieve such an exotic effect.

Testing out his signal jammer proved the same. It interfered with the working of every kind of sensor or transmission device in range, exactly like the device that Calabast once used on Harkensen I.

Ves predicted that this newly created gadget might even save his life if the current mission went awry! There was no better way to escape a hunt than to block every form of electronic observation in his vicinity. People tended to trust in their machines more than their own eyes when hunting for distant targets. This meant that as long as Ves ran far enough away, he'd be safe from pursuit.

"Hm, in fact, these effects are remarkably similar to something that I used to own and make use of quite frequently."

He recalled the times when he activated his System-bought Privacy Shield and Stealth Augment. It cost him a significant amount of DP to obtain the most preliminary versions of these functions, but they worked like a charm.

While the System-bought upgrades to his personal comm worked best, Ves enjoyed crafting his own versions that copied some of their functions.

Ves realized that this might be a better strategy going forward. Instead of purchasing expensive but powerful functions at rip-off prices from the System, he could instead spend his DP on purchasing the requisite Skills that were necessary to design and reproduce the functions on his own!

"Tch! I'd be ideal if I can make that work, but my mind is not an endless repository for knowledge."

Ves couldn't endlessly accumulate knowledge without end. Spreading himself too broadly into too many unrelated fields would strain his design philosophy and generally muddle up his cognitive functioning.

Besides the Polymath and her proteges who somehow made it work, no other mech designer dared to accumulate an endless amount of knowledge!



In any case, he now that he finished upgrading some of his gear, he felt a lot more secure against any surprises that might pop up one day.

As he strapped his deceptively simple-looking gadgets to his toolbelt, he glanced at the Mark I versions of his toys. He may not have a use for them anymore, but he might as well cheer up someone else. He shoved them towards Ketis.

"You can have these."

"Really?!"

"Yep. Just don't break them or throw them around. They're more fragile than you think."

Ketis had been watched with jealous eyes as Ves increased his personal capabilities. As a Swordmaiden, she cared a lot about increasing her personal prowess.

Ves must have been infected by her compulsion because he took over her habit wholesale.

The Swordmaiden eagerly gasped the two gadgets and toyed with them as if she was a kitten. She quickly passed over the stealth detector, figuring that her chances of encountering something under stealth was low, and directed most of her attention to the signal jammer. Despite its short range, it proved to be effective at blocking many kinds of signals and sensors.

Any woman yearned for moments of privacy in their lives.

"I finally get to block out all those nasty monitoring devices." She muttered with a grin.

"Alright, we're finished here. Let's go back to the office. I've got another lesson in store for you."

"Nooooo!"

Now that he completed his first important side project, he directed his spare attention to his second side project, and arguably his most important. In his obsessive rush to design and fabricate his ultracompact batteries, he left his original goal of figuring out stealth tech in the corner like a neglected child.

Ves felt a little guilty for being unable to treat this important project with the respect it deserved, but now should be different!

Of course, he still needed to work away at the backlog of work that slowly piled up while he chased after his latest toys. Fortunately, he hadn't been too neglectful, so it didn't take too long for him to address the most pertinent issues.

He also needed to spend some necessary time to shape his student's perspective. Under his direction in the last month, Ketis not only gained a new respect for hands-on work, she also became accustomed to a more productive work ethic, though the latter was mostly due to his hounding and threats of handing her over to Chief Haine more than anything else.

After she familiarized herself with the principles of an orthodox mech designer, Ves considered his work to be half-done. He instilled her with the bare essentials of everything she needed to know as a mech designer besides actual science and engineering knowledge.

She could always increase her knowledge in her own time, but immersing her with some of the institutional customs of a classically educated mech designer was impossible by herself. Ves did her a huge favor that increased her overall qualities as a mech designer by a huge leap compared to other pirate designers native to the frontier!

However, subjecting her to an abundance of dry information left some gaps in her imagination. Ves tried his best to shore up her shortcomings that she

missed due to being homeschooled, but she experienced a lot of difficulty in understanding the context of what she gained.

"Why does all of this matter?" She burst out one day. "All of this dry reading makes me want to pull out my horns! Why does all of this stupid stuff matter when I'm never going to settle down in civilized space?! Who cares about what the MTA wants! And what does it mean when I have to find my own way? This is too confusing!"

Ves turned to Ketis while crossing his arms. "Some of the reading material I gave you is a bit boring, but they are laying the foundation for you to formulate your own design philosophy and thereby define a goal for yourself to pursue for the rest of your life."

"You bandy about that phrase a lot. Design philosophy. Design philosophy! DESIGN PHILOSOPHY! What does that even mean?! Why are you so obsessed with it?! Mayra only mentioned it once or twice while I studied under her, but she never hit me over the head with those words!"

"What do you think the word means? Don't worry about trying to sound sophisticated. Just say what your heart is telling you."

That caused Ketis to pause. Her irritation melted away as she put serious thought on his question. Answering it wasn't easy because it encompassed many aspects. To a mech designer who hadn't even reached the threshold of formulating a design philosophy, they treated it as something alien.

Eventually, she ventured out a guess. "A design philosophy is.. a dream, I guess? The way Mayra and you talk about it is as if it's an ideal that you can never reach.. but chase after it anyway. Is that about right?"

"It's more than an unattainable dream." Ves answered seriously. "A design philosophy is a dream we'd like to come true, but the difference is that some mech designers have achieved that goal. Why do you think Master Mech

Designers are so respected? They've been chasing after a dream that everyone else thinks is impossible to achieve, but they somehow made it possible through a combination of innovative research and a lot of hard work!"

"What's the point of holding such a dream when a nobody like me doesn't have a chance of reaching that height?"

"Never think like that!" Ves barked sharply. "I've seen so many mech designers who thought that way and simply gave up. Don't ever fall into the negative feedback loop where you lose confidence because your designs are disappointing which makes you lose more confidence which only further drags down your design work. Every mech designer has an opportunity to climb to fortune! You just have to keep working hard despite the obstacles in your way. I see a lot of potential in you, you know."

"Really? You're not just yanking my chain, are you?"

"I'm not the kind of person who's in the habit of lying." That was a big fat lie, but Ketis didn't need to know that. Ves continued without blinking his eyes.

"Your learning ability is a lot better than half of my subordinates within the Vandal fleet. If you weren't splitting your attention all the time, you would have gone a lot farther, perhaps even matching my own prowess."

Ketis had the grounds to be somewhat proud to herself. She succeeded under Mayra's tutelage where many lesser sisters failed.

Still, perhaps due to how easy she became a Novice, she didn't quite appreciate the depth of her accomplishments. She took too many aspects about mech design for granted.

"Look, I'm glad you're telling me I'm awesome, but even my awesome self can't quite figure out the fuss about design philosophy. Then again, I never saw someone else's design philosophy except Mayra's. What's your design philosophy anyway?"

Ves guessed that she needed to hear an example, so he generously obliged. He made sure to keep the secret parts to himself, not just to protect against Ketis, but also against the uninvited guest that must be eavesdropping on them right behind his shoulder.

"My design philosophy is a little unusual, and it came about in unusual circumstances. You see, I'm pursuing a particular dream of mine, something that I'm fairly confident that no other mech designer shares in the entire galaxy!"

"Even I know there's a lot of mech designers in the galaxy. Do you really think you're special?"

"I know I am, because you want to know what I want to achieve? I want to bring mechs to life!"

The look Ketis threw at Ves showed that her entire mind had crashed. For a second, she just couldn't process the absurdity she just heard from someone she looked up to. Did she just hear something stupid?!

Ves chuckled. "I expected a reaction like that. It sounds crazy, but I'm not grasping at straws here. It's a design philosophy that's dear to my heart because it's rooted in my still-formulating beliefs on how reality works. This is why despite sounding so outlandish, I'm confident that I can achieve my dream some day."

"No wonder you have to become a Master to fulfill your design philosophy." She muttered. "You guys are absolutely bonkers!"

"I don't deny that. Call us crazy if you want. The more important fact is that we're ambitious! Chasing after an impossibility centers us to a goal and guides our design ability in a direction that may ultimately lead to some of the most innovative mechs in mech history! Even if we fall short to our eventual goal, for most of us the journey is more important than the destination. It's not

too bad if we fall short halfway because you'll at least be a Journeyman or Senior by the time you've reached the end of your career."

She understood the underlying sentiment of what he tried to convey. "I see! So the design philosophy keeps you preoccupied with improving yourself. Even if you've reached a dead end, you're a lot better off than if you don't have a goal in mind at all."

"A design philosophy is more than a goal. That is merely one of its functions. It also has a measurable influence on the mechs that you design. At the higher end of the mech industry, your design philosophy distinguishes your work from your rivals. Now that you've heard me describe my own design philosophy, if a bit briefly, you should be capable of formulating your own one. Why don't you make an attempt right now?"

"Now?!"

#### **Chapter 715 For Family**

"I'm not ready yet!" Ketis strenuously objected.

"I don't think that's true." He firmly pushed back. "You reflexibly shy away from such a momentous decision, but you can't keep putting it off forever. At some point, that will turn into an ingrained instinct that will permanently stall your ambitions in your career. If you have any desire to achieve something greater, then you have to keep moving forward. You're not getting any nearer to your destination if you don't start working your metaphorical feet!"

He concluded this after a lot of thought about the circumstances of other mech designers. The flood of so many mech designers in the industry forced a lot of them out of the market, but the defining factor whether someone bowed out early or survived at the end depended on willpower!

Without the mental fortitude to work towards a goal, how would mech designers get anywhere? Ves figured out that if he hadn't obtained the

System, he would still be able to make his career lift off as long as he worked hard enough.

Even if he went bankrupt after his first business venture failed, he could always study hard and try again with better designs and an improved business plan in mind. The main challenge in such a situation was trying to raise capital, but even that could be surmounted as long as he attracted someone stupid enough to invest in his business.

Even if a mech designer's situation seemed hopeless, there was always a way out!

Unfortunately, Ketis hadn't learned this lesson yet, so Ves had to guide her on the right track.

"I feel like you're asking the impossible out of me." She pouted at him. "I thought I knew everything about mech design, but then I met you. Your standards are so ridiculously high that I bet that even Master Mech Designers aren't so tough!"

"That's impossible." He laughed. "A genuine Master will drive me up the wall just like how I'm supposedly driving you crazy. You haven't seen anything of how a true talent is brought up!"

She turned to another question that had been weighing on her mind for a while. "Why are you working so hard to reach such an impossible goal?"

That was an important question, and one that made him pause. He understood that she didn't wish to hear an answer related to his aspirations about mechs. Instead, the question was more about his personal motivations. What drove him to pursue an impossible dream?"

"I think.. it's largely for myself. I want to make my life better. I want my life to have meaning. Leaving behind a legacy that will transform the entire fabric of the mech industry is one of the greatest accomplishments I can ever achieve.

If I can't achieve immortality, then I want the next-best thing and be mentioned in every history book."

"That sounds really selfish, you know." She frowned. "What about your family?"

The Larkinsons? "I do care about them, but my extended family can take care of themselves. If there is anyone in my family that I want to help, it's my parents. Both of them.. they're not in a good spot, especially my father. As for my mother.. I don't know. In any case, I'm so weak and small right now that I can't even save my own father."

This issue continued to weigh on him in the back of his mind because it took far too long to become strong enough to gain enough power to help his father. Even though he had become an Apprentice Mech Designer who was at the cusp of advancing into Journeyman, he was still being jerked around like a pawn by hidden players in a sprawling game that already killed millions of people.

Taking stock at his progress so far, Ves became despondent at the thought that he'd still be a powerless nobody in the eyes of the true movers and shakers of the Komodo Star Sector. Even Masters dreaded at the thought of fighting back against a behemoth like the Five Scrolls Compact!

"It's that bad, huh?" Ketis asked, though she already knew the answer. "Hey, at least you still have decent parents to look forward to seeing again. Mine are total scumbags. Growing up in the settlements is not a good life for anyone. It's so backwards and dirty at the place where I grew up that I won't shed a tear if someone chucked a meteorite at it. The frontier is better off without that cesspool. As far as I'm concerned, the Swordmaidens are my family now."

The two commiserated a bit about family. They both felt strongly about their missing or adopted relatives.



Suddenly, Ketis adopted a mischievous grin and bumped him with her elbow. "Say, what about the missus? Do you have a girlfriend waiting back at home?"

His cheeks would have flushed if she asked that question a couple of years ago, but his rough experiences in the last couple of years had matured him a bit. He knew just how to answer that question.

"I don't have a girlfriend. I haven't met the right woman yet."

"Not even me?"

He laughed. "Don't think too highly of yourself. If nothing else, I respect the boundaries between a teacher and their students. I don't want to take advantage of my authority."

"Pfff! Since when do pirates care about the rules! Live a little! Have some fun!"

"This is exactly why I forced you to familiarize yourself with the MTA's rules and principles. You can't just say no to every rule just because. Some of them are genuinely good ideas that you should think about adopting for yourself. Establishing a proper teacher-student relationship is one of them. Besides, I don't think we're compatible people."

"Oh? I think we're getting along just fine." She said in a tone that Ves couldn't place. She sidled a little closer against his body. "You know what they say in the dramas? Opposites attract. Who's to say that you need to be 'compatible' to make a good couple? Look at us. We're made for each other! You're the brains while I can act as the muscle! That's a classic combination"

His brows began to furrow. Ketis took this joke a bit too far, and began to enter uncertain territory. He turned towards the clingy Swordmaiden and placed his hands around her, only to gently push her away.

"I'm flattered you say that about me, but you're still a bit young and you probably haven't hung around a lot of boys your age."

"Feh. Those pirate dweebs?" She sneered. "Their breaths stink and they're as smart as a piece of rock!"

"What I wanted to say is that I guess I'm attracted to a different kind of woman."

"Oh? What's your type?"

"Hmm. I don't know. Gentle? Refined?" He frowned. "I'd love to be someone who can be composed. She has to be intelligent as well. It would help a lot if she's a mech designer. That way she can keep up with me. There's nothing better in my life if I can share my dreams with someone else. They don't have to adopt the same design philosophy as mine, but it helps if they can understand my difficulties and cheer me on. Oh, and she has to be pretty as well, but since any woman can change her looks these days, that doesn't need to be said."

Ves felt kind of stupid saying that last bit, but he didn't want Ketis to think he had a fetish for weird stuff.

Luckily, she didn't focus on that part at all. Instead, her eyes grew a little cross when she took in his list of demands. "So.. if I understand this right, if I become a really good mech designer, like, just as good as you, I'm your ideal type?"

He chuckled again. "That's only one of my criteria. To be honest, I don't really know what to look for in a girlfriend. I guess I'm fine with whatever so long as they aren't completely illiterate. I'm not that good with women in the first place, and since advancing my career has already taken up my time, I never really have the time to chase after someone I like."

"Oh? Do you already have a girl in mind?"

The shadow of a single woman came to mind. She mesmerized him ever since he glanced at her at a distance at the start of his studies at Rittersberg.

Meeting her again in Leemar had been a pleasant surprise, though he always knew she was worthy enough to be selected by a Master.

Ves yearned to meet someone like her again, but they lived very different lives right now. At this stage in their lives, their careers mattered more than their love lives.

While Ves recalled a woman from his past that he never quite figured out, Ketis watched his expression carefully.

"So you do have a girl in your dreams! You dog!"

He shook his head. "We're so far apart that I don't think I'll ever have the opportunity to be in the same room as her. Besides her, no one else has intrigued me as much. And before you ask, I'm not interested in swinging the other way!"

They both laughed, and the strange tension in the air lifted away.

"Let's get back to the topic at hand." He said when they calmed down. "We both have family we want to help. Neither of us can do anything in our current state. We're basically the mech industry's equivalent to cannon fodder! If I ever want to get my parents out of a fix, I need to become someone comparable to the Skull Architect before he got exiled to the frontier. As for you, if you want to pick up where Mayra left off, you will have to find a way to advance to Journeyman within the next twenty years."

"Why twenty years? That's way too fast!"

"I don't think so." He shook his head. "Many promising mech designers have advanced to Journeyman within twenty years of graduating to become a Novice. Mayra actually looks like someone who managed to do so. If she can do it, so can you."

"But she studied under the Skull Architect!"

"So what, Ketis? That doesn't stop you from seeking out another teacher! I'm helping you right now, and so long as you can find another Senior to study under, there won't be any difference between you and your mentor! You have to believe in yourself. Trust me, I've seen a lot of pathetic mech designers who barely deserve the title, but you're not one of them. Mayra believes in you. The Swordmaidens believe in you. I believe in you."

That affected her more than Ves had anticipated. She looked genuinely touched by his encouragement.

"I.. I don't know what I can say. I never felt so confident about my mech design stuff. Maybe you're right. Maybe I am good at this stuff!"

After so many interactions, Ves finally felt vindicated. He succeeded in getting through her thick skull!

"That's the spirit!" He encouraged. "It's okay to feel good for yourself. As a mech designer, you should be proud of yourself, but more importantly, realize that you are capable of reaching greater heights as long as you work towards them! If you need a reminder why you should work so hard, think back on your family. Your sisters are relying on you. Twenty years. Set that as a goal. Try and advance to Journeyman within twenty years. Most talented mech designers that have eventually gone on to become Seniors and Masters usually reach Journeyman within the first two decades of their career."

He set a bold goalpost for Ketis, but he figured that a naturally competitive woman like her would relish the challenge rather than shy away from it. If there was one good trait about the Swordmaidens, it was that they were naturally accustomed to swimming against the current. Their harsh training regimes instilled a rare sense of discipline that pirates often lacked.

The problem with Ketis was that she needed to apply her discipline in a better way and set her priorities straight.

Eventually, she emerged from her internal deliberation with a spark in her eyes. Ves had been waiting for her passion to ignite.

She grinned at him. "You know what? I'm going to give that a try. If nothing else, becoming a Journeyman in less than two decades will make me your girlfriend!"

He flicked her in the head. "Some dreams are never meant to be fulfilled!"

"Didn't you say the exact opposite earlier? Nothing is impossible!"

### **Chapter 716 Influence Game**

All jokes aside, she at least appeared fired up. Having lit a fire in her mind, Ves knew that he had just moved past the hardest part to guiding her on the right part.

She cared about her family! She would do anything for the Swordmaidens, and hammering home the assertion that she'd be a lot more helpful to them as a Journeyman rather than a Novice should be enough to set her on the right path.

As for her idle boast of becoming his girlfriend if she managed to advance to Journeyman within two decades, Ves simply treated it as nonsense.

After fobbing her off by throwing another assignment at her, Ves reflected on his progress with the excitable young woman. His trial to see if he made a good mech designer designer started to bear some promising results. Ketis finally started to shape up to become a proper mech designer and it only took near-constant hand holding to get to that point.

He frowned at that. "It's fine to spend so much time and effort on a single mech designer if I want to bring up a protege, but I can't keep repeating these one-on-one tutoring sessions all the time. It eats way too much of my time."

Then he thought back to Master Olson and how her assistant Horatio took care of the trivial matters in her stead.

"That's it! Why do I have to do everything myself? I can implement a hierarchy!"

Ves already intended to establish a design team for his company once the Mech Corps booted him back to civilian life. He'd be willing to guide, shape and design his first couple of mech designers, but at some point it became a waste of his precious time.

In such situations, he'd be better off if he designed a set of principles he expected his mech designers to adhere to. In the meantime, he could foist the actual responsibility of indoctrinating his new recruit to a capable second of his own.

He frowned again. "Indoctrination is such a nasty word, yet it has its uses. I always knew the line between teaching and indoctrination is blurred. To think I've become guilty of the very behavior I've condemned!"

Wrestling with the research papers written by self-important academics who believed they understood the ultimate truths of reality left him with a very foul taste to their pervasive manipulative tricks. Yet suddenly he realized that Ves had actually taken a page out of their books and applied some of those insidious tricks on his innocent student!

It turned out he learned much more than scientific knowledge from studying those research papers!

"Damnit!" He cursed to himself. "The mental contamination must have gotten to me. I've become just like them despite my confidence in my methods!"

He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster.

If you gaze into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.

He knew the risks. He always expected to be marked by what he experienced. Was it no surprise that Ves took note of the best practices among the lead authors of the research papers he read and applied them to his own needs?

What was wrong about borrowing some dirty tricks when he benefited from them? Besides, he harbored no harmful intentions to Ketis. He merely wanted to accelerate her learning process and skip over all of the boring stuff that would force her to lose her interest.

Okay, he admitted it. His teaching approach to Ketis basically consisted of indoctrinating her to his views on mech design. Not all of it, but enough to pull her into his camp.

At a proper university or institution, they could afford to let the students become familiar with the issues slowly enough for them to make their own judgement about their values and principles. Debates, self-reflection and witnessing many examples allowed every mech designer to shape their perspective on mech design on their own terms with only a varying amount of bias for the predominant viewpoint of their schools.

Yet Ves did not have the luxury to wait for Ketis to crawl forward one shuffle at a time. He basically picked her up and threw her into a path he had already chosen out for her without her say so. Of course, even if he received Mayra's implicit consent that he could shape Ketis' view of the profession, he did the young woman a major disservice by stripping her of the right to choose her own future.

Something like that rankled the MTA, who generally aimed to foster a diverse and eclectic community of mech designers, within limits of course.

Ves rationalized his actions as something that at least benefited Ketis compared to the old status quo. "If I didn't indoctrinate her, she would have continued to be a confused little girl who doesn't know a thing about what she

wants to do in the future. At least I've lit up a fire in her drive. What path she treads shouldn't matter as long as she keeps going forward."

Teaching turned out to be harder than he thought. Being responsible for designing a mech designer meant that Ves could either take the time to allow his students to make up their own mind, or force them forward in his chosen direction to speed up their maturation process.

Again, it came down to time, and how valuable it was the less he had at his disposal.

"I guess that's why the MTA is so adamant about schools. A minimum of four years of dedicated study in an environment that's uniquely suitable to foster mech designers is the best environment to raise a rounded mech designer that can think for themselves."

However, the abundant freedom of thought at those institutions also led to a lot of indecision. Mech designers surrounded by different perspectives couldn't make up their minds on which paths they should follow. This left them stranded at the starting line for so long that inertia solidified them in place, ending their careers after an extensive period of stagnation.

If only they enjoyed more guidance. Even if it came in the form of indoctrination, it was better than nothing.

In short, the act of teaching left the student at the mercy to the teacher.

"This is why the student-teacher relationships are so strictly defined in the mech industry." He realized, and on this, Ves agreed with the MTA. "It's too easy to abuse this relationship. I can make or break a mech designer. I can turn them into a self-sufficient machine or an unknown slave who is highly dependent on me. It all depends on my approach and my methods."



Ketis should thank herself that Ves still possessed some principles on this matter. Not only did he aspire to become a serious teacher, he also made a deal with Mayra that he didn't intend to renege.

He understood now on a practical level why so many Seniors and Masters became teachers and professors at various institutions. It allowed them to come into touch with a large amount of rough gems that they could gently shape into their future supporters.

"It's an influence game. Even if the graduates don't come and work for you, they'll still be acting as an extension of your ideology!"

This might be one of the ways in which a teacher propagated an unpopular or controversial design philosophy.

He saw something similar in the research papers related to ultracompact energy storage. Former students and proteges to older authors published their own papers in support of their teachers. Ves recognized their connection because the former students came from the same institutions, or roped in their old teachers as contributors.

Ves even encountered a research paper that involved up to four generations of teachers and students! Some old geezer who was several hundred years old taught another geezer who was a couple hundred years old who taught a genius who just reached a hundred years old who taught another prodigy who recently became fifty years old!

"That old man at the starts sits at the head of his own school of thought!"

These apex figures played the long game! Even Master Olson, who was practically a newborn in the mech industry, already instituted a formal hierarchy of subordinate mech designers.

Though Masters already realized their ambitious design philosophies by themselves, Ves guessed that the next step would be to popularize it and add their methods to the galactic standard on mech design!

"I don't know what that has to do with advancing to become a Star Designer, though." He scratched his head. "From what I can tell, a Star Designer is someone who transcends every previous boundary. They are such capable designers that their expertise is no longer limited to mechs! They can design practically anything!"

A Star Designer excelled in designing mechs, but they could easily branch out to designing starships and space stations even if they bore no relation to their design philosophy!

"Hmm, that's still too far for me to consider. I need to look back on my own situation."

Everyone who heard his design philosophy plainly believed he talked nonsense. Ves didn't blame them. You had to be really stupid or delusional to think mechs possessed an intrinsic quality of life.

Due to his secretive methods, he held no attraction to taking part in the influence game. Building up supporters would help him, but keeping them too close risked exposing his secrets.

For better or worse, Ves needed to withhold a large amount of secrets related to his design philosophy to himself. Yet where did that leave him in the future?

"Hmm. I'll probably have a harder time than others when I become a Senior. Yet that should change once I become a Master and prove my supposed crackpot theories are viable."

Even before that point, Ves should already prove himself to be capable of strengthening mechs beyond what their design and material composition suggested!

If everything went according to plan, mech designers would beg to become his student or subordinate!

Ves briefly indulged in fantasy, but such a future took decades or centuries to accomplish. Right now, he needed to focus on his more immediate priorities.

"Since I have a lot of free time on my hands, I should get to work on finishing my research on stealth tech."

He turned his attention back to his own preoccupations and left Ketis to stew on her own. Ves didn't wish to rush her forward now that she finally developed an inkling of passion. Having ignited the tinder, it still needed time for her fire to grow bigger. Right now, a single gust of wind could easily snuff out the smouldering flames.

As Ves poured himself into his other side project, the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet journeyed on through FTL. Once they emerged into an inconsequential star system far away from the border to civilized space, they immediately encountered a possible threat in the system!

An alarm rang throughout every ship in the fleet!

"YELLOW ALERT! MINOR SANDMEN FLEET DETECTED IN THE INNER SYSTEM!"

Ves and Ketis already donned their full ensemble of armor and sat at their stations in the combat carrier's command center. This deep into the frontier, not a single Vandal or Swordmaiden took an FTL emergence lightly. A crisis could hit them at any moment, and the presence of a sandmen fleet within the system only vindicated their caution despite its distance from the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

Their hearts raced when they heard about the sandmen presence. Their fears only started to subside once the announcement informed them that the aliens were far from the inner system.

Nevertheless, they maintained their vigilance and remained at their action stations.

The sensor officer quickly looked up from his console. "Sir! Our long-range sensors have detected a debris field in the vicinity of an asteroid belt! The sandmen fleet is scouring through the debris field right now! Two unknown human fleets are also present at the debris field, and one seems to be chasing the other!"

"Which outfits do they come from!?"

"Unknown, sir! Their transponders are silent!"

"Then find it out as soon as possible!"

Minutes passed by as the long-ranged sensors resolved more data. Soon, a tentative picture emerged.

A three-way battle had occurred! The two unknown human fleets first bumped into each other. A fierce battle erupted that downed multiple ships and several mech companies worth of spaceborn mechs. At some point, a sandmen fleet set upon the combatants, scaring them off and forcing them to flee the valuable debris field and its untouched salvage!

The big question that hung on everyone's minds right now was whether the Flagrant Swordmaidens intended to intervene.

### **Chapter 717 Deep Frontier Encounter**

Ves saw no reason why the Flagrant Vandals should involve themselves into a dispute between two fairly strong outfits in the middle of nowhere. The sandmen presence further added to the danger.

While it appeared that none of the three forces possessed the strength to defeat the Flagrant Swordmaidens, they could still inflict a significant amount of damage if they fought to the death.

As far as Ves and most Vandals were concerned, they were merely bystanders on their way to another destination. The incidents that happened along their route shouldn't concern them at all.

Yet curiosity tickled at them. What made these two forces venture so far out into the frontier? They had long reached past the point where regular pirate outfits roamed. This was because pirates earned their living by robbing other ships or settlements, and those mostly popped up in civilized space or just beyond its borders.

The further someone ventured into the frontier, the fewer signs of human presence they encountered. How could pirates ever earn a living in such a desolate place?

Therefore, those who tended to venture this far out either sought out a specific treasure or attempted to flee from some pervasive threat.

The odds were high that the two warring outfits in the interior of the so-called Ermeghast System possessed peculiar backgrounds.

The possibility that the two outfits might be hunting for the same objective as the Flagrant Swordmaidens hadn't been lost on their commanding officers. Both Commander Lydia and Major Verle grew suspicious at encountering two strong forces on their route towards the Starlight Megalodon.

While the sensor operators busied themselves with figuring out the providence of the two separate outfits in the inner system, the tactical officer provided a preliminary report on the composition of the sandmen fleet.

The Flagrant Vandals didn't know much about the sandmen. To be honest, the tactical officer borrowed heavily from the intelligence provided by Lydia's Swordmaidens. As a pirate gang that roamed the frontier for decades, they had their fair share of encounters against the sentient sand-like race.

"Sir, our preliminary estimates suggest that the medium-sized sandmen fleet is led by an inexperienced sand admiral. The leading sandman doesn't show a lot of imagination in the deployment of its fleet elements."

"What is their concrete fleet strength?"

"If they aren't hiding any other assets, then we've pegged their fleet composition at one sandman mothership and twelve sandmen escort ships, sir. After analyzing their sizes and comparing them to historical data, we've also estimated the effective strengths of their 'ships'. The effective combat strength of the sandmen mothership is analogous to a combat carrier with a full complement of spaceborn mechs, while the strength of the escort ships is comparable to a converted carrier and its complement."

This sounded formidable to any medium-sized mech outfit, but the Flagrant Swordmaidens had little to fear from such a force.

Due to the decentralized leadership structure of the sandmen race, every sandman leader expressed themselves differently. However, almost all of the sandmen leaders who brought their forces into space tended to start from the same default template.

The template of a sandman fleet always consisted of a 'mothership' housing the sandman admiral and a number of uniform escort 'ships' in multiples of six.

Some exoanthropologists asserted that the sandmen operated on a base-six numeral system. Put simply, it was as if the sandmen counted with the help of a pair of hands with three fingers each.

A handful of conspiracy theorists even speculated whether the sandmen and the Hexadric Hegemony were one and the same! After all, they both worshipped the number six! Of course, the Hegemony always lashed out

violently when somebody tied them to an alien race that just happened to share a love for the same number.

In any case, calling the clumps of sand-like agglomerations of semi-sentient materials a 'ship' was something of a human misnomer. The sandmen might not consider them ships at all. They could be their homes, their hives, their slave pens or whatever else. The point was that treating sandmen 'ships' as ships imposed human qualities on them that didn't exist.

Case in point, one of the favored ways a sandman ship employed against a human ship was the sandstorm attack. A sandman escort vessel broke apart into streams of sand and attempted to engulf or run through a vulnerable enemy ship in a cataclysmic flood of living particles!

The best way to fight against a sandmen fleet was to bombard it at long range, preferably with kinetic or explosive weapons. Energy weapons such as lasers hardly scratched them, and in certain cases even replenished their energy reserves!

Naturally, melee mechs only brought brought themselves to their deaths if they approached a sandman ship. The living sand would instantly turn into a huge mouth that engulfed these metallic morsels as soon as they got close!

Everyone in the command center had already been briefed in basic sandmen naval doctrine. They also knew that the sandmen tended to become smarter in larger groups.

A single fleet composed of a mothership and twelve escorts should be capable of some imagination, but more often than not made a couple of dumb decisions.

"Sir, the sandmen are currently prioritizing energy capture. They have chosen to sit on the debris field near the asteroid belt rather than to chase after the

two human fleets. This indicates that they are rather starved and desperate to gain more energy."

Major Verle nodded in acknowledgement. "This far out in the frontier aren't very good hunting grounds for sandmen. All of the sandmen governors have already laid claim to promising colony sites, so they're forced to roam the stars in search of prey or to passively absorb heat from the local stars."

Sandmen didn't fare very well when exposed to the direct radiation of a star. While stars outputted an enormous amount of energy, it came in the form of extremely destructive radiation that posed a threat not only to humans, but also to sandmen. Therefore, they preferred to obtain their energy by other means, such as stealing them from humans or by absorbing them on certain planets that shielded them from the most harmful aspects of radiation.

More information poured in, but this time about the human presence in the Ermeghast System.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens didn't possess any direct quantum connection to the battle that took place in the inner system. The light that emanated from the battle took a long time to arrive at their emergence point.

Therefore, everything they saw right now was like a security recording of something that had already happened. The combatants might have already left the system at this point!

"Sir, the Swordmaidens have identified the identity of the two human forces. The ships being chased by the other human force are remnants of the Shining Stars Colonization Fleet, which is composed of exiles from the Dark Plasma Star Sector. At the time the light of this event has reached our location, they are actively pursued by the Fire Treaders, an aggressive pirate gang that hails from the Ravienne Alliance!"



The information provided by the Swordmaidens stunned the Vandals. Shining Stars Colonization fleet? Dark Plasma Star Sector? Fire Treaders? Ravienne Alliance?

None of those names sounded simple!

Just the mention of the Ravienne Alliance alone sent shivers through their back. Headed by Ravienne's Ravagers, this pirate bloc was one of the two most powerful pirate alliances in the Faris Star Region. Compared to the insidious Dragon Alliance, the adherents of Ravienne were all a bunch of violent anarchists that wanted to set the galaxy alight for their own amusement!

"What intelligence have they shared on this gang? No wait, let me connect to Commander Lydia directly. I want to hear from her own mouth how much of a threat these Ravienne Alliance pirates represent."

Commander Lydia's bust quickly popped up in a projection in front of Major Verle's command chair. "Verle."

"Commander, what can you tell me about the Fire Treaders?"

"The Fire Treaders are bad news. They're pyromaniacs and they love to set everything on fire. They employ both spaceborn and landbound mechs, but they're mostly known for the latter because ships in space don't tend to burn very well. As far as we know, they aren't after money and they don't fulfill any missions for their alliance. They're just a bunch of mad dogs who go on random burning sprees and keep themselves afloat by salvaging what's left among the ashes."

"If we happen to come into conflict with the Fire Treaders, will we land ourselves in trouble against the Ravienne Alliance?"

"It depends." The commander pressed her lips against each other as she contemplated the potential consequences. "Ravienne hardly cares about the

cannon fodder that comprises the bottom of their organization. If we come to blows for some reason, we won't be welcome on their space stations, but they won't go sending hunting fleets after us."

"That sounds.. rather mild."

"The Ravienne Alliance are a bunch of crazies, but even they'll get tired if they constantly chase after small fry that provoked them for some reason. Also, you have to know that most gangs that make up the Ravienne Alliance are crazy themselves, so they constantly get into fights without a reason. Generally, as long as you kill only half of them and let the other half go, the Alliance won't make a big fuss. It only becomes an affront to Ravienne if you wipe them all out."

This sounded as if being a member of their Alliance provided almost no protection, which defeated the main point of joining such an organization in the first place!

"How can the Ravienne Alliance even work with a structure like this?"

"Oh, the Alliance is split up into several tiers." She explained. "There are a lot of peripheral outfits who are competing hard against each other to become a part of their core. Once an outfit reaches that point, they become part of the leadership structure. A peripheral outfit that's too weak and stupid to survive on their own isn't worthy to be part of the Alliance's core."

Ravienne sure knew her stuff when she instituted such a promotion structure. It sounded like a great way to weed out the idiotic, the suicidal and the overconfident among her organization.

Commander Lydia frowned through the projection. "Why do you ask?"

"There's something about the so-called Shining Stars Colonization Fleet that interests me." Major Verle replied. "Look at that debris field. The majority of the ship wrecks likely came from the colonists. Who knows why they came all

the way to this remote section of the frontier from the Dark Plasma Star Sector, but if they're so desperate to flee this far, there is bound to be a story behind their desperation."

Both of them nodded at each other as they shared similar suspicions. A colony fleet of this size wouldn't randomly traverse so deep in the frontier for no reason. The chance of getting caught by the sandmen grew further and further the more they traveled into territory untouched by human civilization.

Still, the three-way battle also threatened to be a distraction from their main mission. Nothing that happened in the Ermeghast System should concern them. The Starlight Megalodon awaited further up ahead in their journey. Even if the Vandals harbored some sympathy for the colonists, they only had themselves to blame for their demise.

"We should hail the lead ship of the Shining Stars Colonization Fleet." Major Verle suggested. "Much of their fleet is in ruins and only remnants are left. It's safe to say their colonization effort has died in this star system."

"I don't oppose this course of action. If we can gain some advantages from this tragedy, then I don't mind a small detour!"

Both of their commanding officers had the same idea in mind. The ships who survived the destruction of their colonization fleet likely carried some of the most valuable goods and supplies! If the Flagrant Swordmaidens played their cards ripe, these goods and supplies would be ripe for the taking!

#### **Chapter 718 Naive Colonists**

To hail a vessel more than a light-hour away from the Flagrant Swordmaidens required the use of their quantum entanglement node. Among their entire combined fleet, only the Jaded Sword and the Shield of Hispania still possessed an intact node.

Contacting a stranger you met in a desolate star system in the middle of nowhere posed a risk. The transmission attempt alone exposed the combined fleet's whereabouts. However, emerging in the same system already exposed them considering the light of their arrival would arrive at the occupants more than an hour later anyway.

The Ermeghast System centered around an orange dwarf star, and a fairly small one at that.

An Orange dwarf was like the middle child between the bright and promising yellow dwarf and the total good-for-nothing waste of space of a red dwarf. Like all dwarf stars, they lived a long time, but they had the benefit of being a lot less volatile in pumping out masses of radiation in its own star system.

This made them prime spots for developing life-bearing planets. Human colonists favored them because they could easily convert an untamed planet to an ecosystem more favorable to humankind.

The sandmen favored them as well because the relatively gentle nature of an orange dwarf allowed them to absorb its energy without severely damaging their unique biology.

It was too bad that the Shining Stars Colonization Fleet hadn't respected the threat of sandmen and pirates. They were fools to begin with to believe they could colonize a star system outside the protective umbrella of the MTA and CFA.

Whoever conceived of this idea was a massive idiot who took the stewardship of the Big Two for granted. Ves had browsed the location of the Dark Plasma Star Sector a minute ago and saw that it was situated well within the coreward section of the galactic rim.

In other words, they were closer to the galactic heartland than the frontier! It didn't surprise anyone that someone who grew up in such a cozy little star

sector to underestimate the naked threat that could come from every direction once they entered the frontier.

Still, only a couple of Vandals called them idiots out loud. Most people from the Komodo Star Sector descended from brave but foolhardy colonists themselves. The only difference was that they got into the colonization rush when the MTA and CFA officially opened up a new star sector for them to build their new homes.

"Obviously, these exiles haven't gotten the message." He muttered.

Ketis looked confused at him. "Hey, don't call them idiots. Without all those colonists pouring into the frontier, how are we able to obtain some easy salvage? Picking up treasures from fallen and destroyed colonization fleets is one of the most lucrative finds you can score!"

Looking at the sprawling debris field displayed on the local plot, Ves knew that the sandmen would be benefiting the most this time.

Some time passed until the communications officer managed to find the right hailing address for the lead ship of the colonization fleet from the galactic net. The Shield of Hispania sent a transmission request to the flagship and hoped whether she wasn't one of the broken wrecks that littered the Ermeghast System.

"Our hailing attempt is successful, major! We have established a channel with the Rovista Splendor, the flagship of the Shining Stars."

A bald man in his early thirties appeared in the main projector. Immediately, Ves got struck by how pretentiously highborn the man appeared. With his rich light green military-esque uniform encrusted with silver-white filigree, the man screamed attention in an even more obnoxious way than how pirates puffed themselves up.

"I am Major Quinlist Verle, commander of the Verle Task Force detached from the 6th Flagrant Vandals, 3rd Tarry Division, Southern Mech Army of the Bright Republic Mech Corps. On behalf of the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens, our local allies, we'd like to know who you are and what you are doing in this neck of the galactic woods. Our combined fleet has recently arrived at the outer star system and we've noticed your fleet's.. distress."

"Finally! I've finally met someone other than the uncouth yokels that litter this backwater!" The aristocratic figure cried out in relief. The man practically bent forward in and pressed his face closer to the projector, causing his head to balloon in an exaggerated manner. "I don't know who you Flagrant Vandals are, but if you are part of a formal military, then in the name of common civility, SAVE US!"

Major Verle tried hard not to frown. His face automatically jerked away from the projection of the man's amplified head. "Please answer the question, good sir."

"Ah, yes.. weeks and months of crawling around like a beggar on the streets has made me forget my manner. Ahum, you have the august privilege of greeting Hix-Klaaster. I am the Fourth Prince of the Royal House of Talk, which reigns over the Palast Kingdom in the Dark Plasma Star Sector."

"For a Prince of a Royal House, you are far away from home."

To his credit, Prince Hix-Klaaster pushed through his embarrassment and plainly admitted the facts which the Vandals could easily find out on the galactic net.

"A dynastic struggle broke out between my siblings and I. The Palast Kingdom required a new heir and I threw my hat into the ring. In the end, my siblings have proved the better of me, and they strongly urged me to take my ambitions elsewhere. I decided to raise a colonization fleet with my remaining

resources and brought my closest supporters and loyalists out to the great beyond to start anew, as they say. The results.. is as you can see."

The Prince looked tired with his bloodshot eyes and his wrinkling skin. His uniform on the other hand remained gleaming and spotless, likely due to the sophisticated cleaning tech integrated within the smart clothing.

Beyond the man's huge head, Ves was faintly able to get an impression on the rest of the bridge or command center of the flagship.

The officers and operators manning the consoles all looked equally as tired, but unlike the bald prince they didn't benefit from self-cleaning clothes. Debris and broken sections indicated that the Rovista Splendor suffered serious battle damage.

"By all accounts, you've raised a sizable colonization fleet. One that would be sufficient to populate a decent terrestrial planet and accelerate its development by several decades." Major Verle praised, but then he hammered home the reality. "However, my analysts have poured over the light that has reached our location and informed me that you are left with only a single combat carrier, a heavily-damaged light carrier, two cargo haulers and one medium colony ship. That is only a fraction of what you started out with, is that right?"

"Your information is outdated." The prince sighed. "We have lost our light carrier and our colony ship to the Fire Treaders! Do you know how significant losing the latter means?! Two-hundred-thousand loyal men and women frozen in crysleep are fated to be their slaves!"

Some of the Vandals winced, including Ves. Strangely enough, Ketis merely rolled her eyes at the prince's melodramatic display.

"Look at the eyes of that ponce." She whispered to Ves. "He doesn't care a single bone about his own people. He just wants to save his own skin!"

Major Verle looked remorseful. "We are sorry for your loss. However, we can do nothing to save you from your predicament. We have our own mission to pursue. Once our FTL drives finish cycling, The Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens will be departing this system post-haste."

"NO! YOU CAN'T GO! SAVE US! PLEASE SAVE US FROM THE PIRATES AND THE ALIENS!"

Verle coughed awkwardly into his fist. "Ahem, I sympathise with your plight, but as a loyal mech officer of the Mech Corps, I am bound to do my duties. I am sorry to inform you that I am compelled to leave you to your fate."

"NO NO NO!" The bald prince screamed as his eyes shook erratically. "I have money! I have ships! I have mech pilots! I have supplies! All of that can be yours!"

"Who do you think we are, your highness? We are not mercenaries to be bought off with coins and sheep. We are not lacking in any of the assets you've mentioned. I suggest you focus on getting the remainder of your forces out of this star system alive, though it seems that none of your ships are fast enough to outrun the Fire Treaders. In that case, I will light a candle for your inevitable passing or enslavement. I hear that pedigree royal princes are a favored type of slaves among the savages that make up the Ravienne Pirate Alliance. They love to strip princes naked, tie them up above a pit in a public space station, roast them over some flames and prepare some pointy rods to—"

"WAIT!" Hix-Klaaster shrieked. "I can still offer one more asset! I command the loyalty of an expert pilot! He is a good and loyal mech pilot that has served in my personal guard for decades! He is cross-trained in many different mech piloting disciplines and is specialized in piloting both landbound and spaceborn rifleman mechs!"



"—however, I have just been informed that we might still be able to come to your assistance if we move immediately." Verle smoothly changed his tack. "While we are glad to be of assistance to you, mind you that we are taking a considerable risk by deviating from our mission."

The Fourth Prince of some kingdom far away from the frontier looked defeated. "I.. understand. We shall be awaiting your timely rescue. I pledge to you now that I will recompense you more than generously should you ensure my continued survival. While my circumstances are dire, the Palast Kingdom has never revoked my royal title. I am still a legitimate prince of the Royal House of Talk. My word is gold and my promises are ironclad."

"That sounds good and all, but I am more interested in hearing the details of your talented personal guard. A dual-specialist in both landbound and spaceborn combat, you say? If you have such an expert at your disposal, how come your fleet is in such a poor condition?"

The prince hastily commanded one of his communications officers to send out an information packet on their expert pilot before turning back to the projector.

"Venerable Karol Xie is versatile and is trained to operate many types of ranged and melee mechs on land and in space. My elite personal guards are selected from the beginning to be versatile, as you never know when an emergency occurs. Venerable Xie has later specialized in piloting rifleman mechs. He excels with all forms of kinetic weaponry, particularly railguns."

A few moments later, Major Verle received the data packet, which he wordlessly shared with Ves. The shared files came with a note from the commanding officer calling him to evaluate the expert pilot.

He could do that.

As Ves dove into the brief and seemingly redacted record of Venerable Xie, he noted that the man appeared to be in his mid-50's, which left him with

plenty of decades of active service, unlike the Vandals' own deadbeat expert pilot.

"Well, on age alone, he qualifies as a treasure."

Still, as Ves dove deeper into Karol Xie's profile, he encountered some disturbing details.

First, Xie's cross-training in so many different types of mechs had left the expert pilot without a strong focus! Even though he belatedly specialized in rifleman mechs armed with kinetic weapons, the man's radical versatility had done his overall piloting ability any favors. His resonance strength only measured eight laveres at most!

Reaching eight laveres at his age was pathetic! This meant that his growth in this area was virtually stagnant!

"The elite guard training pretty much ruined this expert pilot's future!"

It was such a waste!

### **Chapter 719 Princely Offering**

Venerable Rixt O'Callahan, the Flagrant Vandals' nominal expert pilot, last exhibited a resonance strength of 30 laveres. In his prime, his resonance strength peaked at 44 laveres.

The resonance strength of expert pilots ranged from 1 to 67 laveres.

Though the scale wasn't quite linear, you could roughly say that three Venerable Karol Xie's wouldn't be able to defeat a single Venerable O'Callahan, even if the latter was on his deathbed.

Resonance strength directly amplified several piloting parameters of a mech pilot and their mech. It strengthened their reaction speed and thinking speed. It increased their ability to resonate with the exotics incorporated in their custom mechs, thereby achieving stronger reality-bending feats. It

strengthened the resonance shield that most mechs were able to emit from their frame. It added substance to their skills, so that they were far more than fancy-sounding names.

The higher they measured on the lavere scale, the stronger they performed on the battlefield!

If a mech regiment had to choose between a highly specialised but powerful expert pilot to a versatile but weaker expert pilot, they always went for the former.

Who cared about versatility when one single fist hit hard enough to overcome almost all obstacles? A mech regiment mainly fielded a rigid lineup of mechs, all geared towards a small set of strategies. A strong expert pilot who just happened to be a good fit to their strategy practically multiplied their strength by two or three times!

This could only happen with an expert pilot of Venerable O'Callahan's caliber. As for Venerable Xie with his piddling little resonance strength, the best he could hope for was to employ him as a butcher of cheap enemy mechs. While Xie could still call himself a powerhouse by himself, his lacking top strength meant he wouldn't be able to serve as a sufficient obstacle against enemy expert pilots.

What was the point of employing expert pilots if they couldn't even prevent enemy experts from making mince meat out of your rank-and-file?

Still, it wasn't as if the Flagrant Vandals or Lydia's Swordmaidens had a better choice. The latter never had the opportunity to hire an expert pilot at all, since virtually all experts could find more than adequate employment in civilized space.

As for the Flagrant Vandals, their poor and destitute status in the Mech Corps left them with an old and dying mummy who had already made his last gasp in

an earlier battle against a detachment of the Frosty Meteors. The Vandals might be able to pull out the living corpse for one last hurrah, but that was it. The man would certainly die at the end or even midway into the battle!

"What do you think about Venerable Xie?" He asked Ketis.

The girl studied the profile of the man and made the same verdict as him.

"He's spread himself too thin. Whoever trained him never thought in a million years that Xie could break through as an expert pilot!"

Ves found it amusing that Ketis judged someone else with the sin of spreading their attention thin while she was guilty of the same crime. Still, she had already been spending less and less in daily sword practice, so she was slowly correcting her course.

Ketis had to thank his constant indoctrination effort for that.

"An expert pilot is still an expert pilot. In our current situation, we don't have any effective response against enemy experts except to throw as many of our mech pilots at them as possible. Like mice biting an elephant to death, even if the expert is finally brought down, we will almost certainly be wiped out in the process. Venerable Xie can help us shore up our strategies against an enemy expert."

"You don't sound very confident, though."

"It's the best we can hope for." He shrugged. "Besides, I'm not sure whether Venerable Xie is willing to throw his lot with us. His record states that he's loyal to Prince Hixt-Klaaster to a fault, to the point of sticking with this hopeless fellow even when his siblings exiled him from civilized space. That kind of loyalty is admirable as well as troublesome. With the sensitive mission that we are on right now, an expert's assistance practically doubles our chances of survival, but if he's not trustworthy, it could doom us even faster."

Both Commander Lydia and Major Verle knew the stakes, so they carefully discussed this very issue with Prince Hixt-Klaaster within the private confines of their privacy screens. Ves and the rest could no longer eavesdrop on their conversation. He imagined they were trading many promises and assurances right now.

In the meantime, Ves and various other mech officers quietly passed on their analyses. Ves didn't have much to say about Venerable Xie as a mech pilot. The other Vandal mech officers likely provided a much more detailed dissection of the man's quality as an expert pilot.

What Ves did excel at was analyzing mechs. As Xie flaunted a dual specialty on both landbound and spaceborn mechs, he actually possessed two expert mechs!

"That must be an enormous drain on the prince's resources." He muttered.

The Flagrant Vandals already spent an unhealthy amount of money on maintaining the Parallax Star and its many, many spare parts. Yet that wasn't as exaggerated as building two fully functional expert mechs for a single mech pilot!

Unfortunately for the Shining Stars, Venerable Xie had fought and failed to defend the colonization fleet against the aggression of the Fire Treaders. The pirates aligned to Ravienne overwhelmed his customized spaceborn rifleman mech, the Meridian Echo, with sheer weight of numbers.

The Fire Treaders stomped the Meridian Echo into pieces by now, and its parts littered the expanding debris field flinging through space.

Fortunately, Venerable Xie managed to eject in time and steer his escaping cockpit back to the Rovista Splendor.

The expert pilot even continued to deploy into battle in a spare standard-issue rifleman mech. Predictably, his influence in the battle dropped to a fraction of

his previous strength as his cheaper mech couldn't resonate with his rare ability.

The Venerable failed to save their light carrier and their colony ship from capture or destruction. To Ves, Venerable Xie's failure to accomplish anything in his standard-issue mech was like watching Venerable Foster's doomed struggle all over again.

The running battle took place in space, far from the vicinity of any planet. A landbound mech wouldn't be useful for anything except when employed as a makeshift turret in a bunker or leaning out of an open hangar bay.

The Pale Dancer, Venerable Xie's only remaining expert mech, consisted of a highly mobile rifleman mech that employed fast-firing kinetic rifles to devastating effects.

For an expert mech, it was light, fast but could withstand a decent amount of unaugmented attacks from non-elite mechs. It fired light to medium-hitting projectiles at a fairly fast rate of fire, making it ideal for mowing down entire mech companies of light mechs within a matter of seconds!

The Pale Dancer's relatively light caliber kinetic rifle didn't possess an overwhelming advantage against heavier opponents. Medium knight mechs and any kind of heavy mech would probably be able to shrug off the Pale Dancer's projectiles for maybe a dozen or more seconds.

Of course, Venerable Xie wasn't helpless against heavily-armored opponents.

The expert pilot developed a homebrew combat style called Deadmark Marksmanship. It featured resonating techniques such as the Deadmark Triple Burst and the Deadmark Continuous Burst, both of which excelled against extremely fast-moving targets at close to medium range.

No matter how fast a mech dodged within Venerable Xie's presence, they all died within seconds when put under his scope!

Against heavier armored opponents, Venerable Xie could employ techniques such as the Deadmark Repose, which drew upon a significant amount of mental energy to unleash a devastating charged projectile that pierced through almost every layer of armor!

"Too bad the Venerable can only employ the Deadmark Repose a single time in any battle."

In general, Xie's style slanted towards taking out fast, lightly-armored targets with maximum efficiency. Ves respected that because the opponents they likely faced in the future would likely field a lot of lighter mechs as well. They were simply much more efficient and cheaper to deploy in the frontier.

"What's your take on the Pale Dancer, Ketis?" Ves asked as he inputted his analysis of the landbound rifleman mech in another mini-report for Major Verle. "Do you think it's useful for us?"

"Hm, not really. Not for the Swordmaidens at least. Xie is a guy, so he doesn't fit with us in the first place. His Pale Dancer is a rifleman mech, which we can tolerate, but don't really respect. I don't think Mayra or I are even capable of maintaining this complicated mech. Looking at the samples of the design schematics makes my head hurt. What is up with that? It's like the designer of the Pale Dancer decided to use magic to make the custom mech as jumpy as possible."

"Don't look too close into the schematics. I should have warned you about that." Ves apologised for his own negligence. He thought that Ketis would be too stupid to understand the profoundness of what the Pale Dancer had achieved in terms of amplifying its mobility, but evidently he didn't give the little devil enough credit. "Instead, take a step back and try to judge its overall purpose. What is its purpose?"

Ketis had to think about her answer. She knew that Ves wouldn't be satisfied with a short and plain answer. She needed to dig deeper.

"I think.. The Pale Dancer kind of looks rather simple for a custom mech. Sure, its internals are really complex, and it is really amazing how the mech designer made this mech so fast and agile without turning it into a fragile stick. But.. there's this feel to it that kind of reminds me of cheaper mechs.."

Ves nodded in satisfaction. "You're on the right track. It's a matter of vision! Whoever designed this mech, probably a Senior considering how sophisticated its put together, didn't really put his full effort into designing the best mech possible for Venerable Xie. I think the Senior heard about Xie's limitations beforehand and therefore didn't think it was worth his effort to do his utmost. Instead, he designed a somewhat cookie-cutter rifleman mech that he probably recycled from another custom project."

"What's so bad about the Pale Dancer?"

"It's limited. Its performance parameters are tailored to Xie's historical limits. The mech performs at its best when the Venerable is exerting a resonance strength of eight laves. Yet once he goes over that limit for some reason, the Pale Dancer will still exhibit the same strength! That's because its physical specs have already reached its cap!"

"I see!" Ketis jumped up from her chair. "You are saying that the mech has actually held Venerable Xie back! It prevented him from growing stronger because he didn't notice any increase in strength if his resonance strength spiked past his old limit!"

For an expert pilot to improve, they needed to experience a measurable increase in strength. To design a custom mech with deliberately low performance limits might have enabled Venerable Xie to obtain a fitting mech for a cost-effective price, but it did his growth no favors.



Ves could read the story from the vague hints emanating from the Pale Dancer's X-Factor. Custom mechs and especially expert mechs usually represented the best works of a highly-skilled mech designer. A Senior with a strong design philosophy and an intense amount of focus usually poured their heart into designing an expert mech.

Therefore, even if they weren't conscious of the mechanics behind the X-Factor, their custom mechs nonetheless gain a hint of a coherent spiritual identity. Though primitive and rudimentary compared to what Ves had accomplished long ago, it was still an impressive accomplishment that definitely gave the finished products a tiny but impactful advantage.

"This mech is corrupt from the moment of its conception." Ves grimly stated.

#### **Chapter 720 Doom Rider**

The problems Ves had with the Pale Dancer came from its corrupted vision.

"If you analyze its specs, how it fits with Venerable Xie's abilities, and look at its intended vision, you can see a clear underlying thread running throughout its entire design. The vision for the Pale Dancer has been crooked from the start. The Senior Mech Designer who designed this insidious rifleman mech failed to adhere to the mech designer's creed. Do you still remember what that's about?"

"Uh, it's that phrase about how mech designers should cater to mech pilots as if we're their slavish servants."

"Something like that, but not so severe. The point is that mech designers have a responsibility to design a mech that benefits the mech pilots the most. This especially applies to one-on-one commissions to design a custom mech involving a single mech designer and a single mech pilot."

Whoever designed the Pale Dancer intended to deliver an improper product to the Fourth Prince and Venerable Xie at the initial stage of conception.

While Ves didn't have access to any other designs that Xie might have piloted, he would bet that those mechs consisted of flawed designs as well.

No, flawed would be the wrong word to apply to this case. They were outright malicious, meant to sabotage his future progress without being too obvious about it! How long had this been going on?

"Who is the mech designer of the Pale Dancer?" He asked.

Ketis already dug up the attribution, though there didn't appear to be much to go on. "It says here that it's designed by some Senior retained by the Royal House of Talk. It doesn't add much else."

He grunted. "That's to be expected. I doubt a Senior is willing enough to sign the design with their personal name. Has it gone through MTA validation and certification?"

"No. Didn't you say that expert mechs are never sent to the MTA, teacher?"

"I wanted to make sure. Have you figured out the story behind the Pale Dancer?"

Even if Ketis hadn't been exposed to politics in civilized space, she wasn't stupid. Besides, she watched drama broadcasts from the galactic net like anyone else in her youth. Dynastic struggles breaking out in feudal states were some of the most all-time popular shows in the galaxy.

Ketis ran a hand through the underside of her open helmet. "I bet this Fourth Prince was a loser from the start. The other princes and princesses in the Royal House of Talk likely wielded a lot more power than the Fourth Prince, because they managed to influence their resident Senior Mech Designer to bend his principles and design an awful expert mech for the Fourth Prince's personal champion."

"That's my thoughts as well." He nodded. "By all accounts, the Palast Kingdom is a third-rate state of the Dark Plasma Star Sector, so even if its a Royal House, they shouldn't be able to retain another Senior. With only one mech designer at the top, he can do virtually anything, but that also means securing his loyalty is one of the top priorities of the competing heirs. The Fourth Prince obviously lost at this game, and quite badly as well."

"Still, didn't you say that orthodox mech designers take their principles seriously? How come this Senior acted like a scumbag and handed over the Pale Dancer to one of his clients?"

Ves shook his head. "Politics in civilized space can be just as sleazy as in the frontier. Technically, the Senior retained by Talk fulfilled his end of the bargain. He designed a suitable expert mech for Venerable Xie that allows him to express his full strength. The Senior just didn't do anything extra, even though it is usually customary to do so. If you interpret the principles in a minimalistic way, you can still get away with it without appearing as a hypocrite."

"Wow. That's really dirty."

"That's why the Fourth Prince should have retained his own mech designer instead of relying someone from his Royal House. There are too many ways a mech designer can screw with their mech pilots if they don't take the mech designer's creed seriously."

This explained why the MTA constantly pushed their creed into every mech designer's face every chance they got. Recalling how many times he heard the phrase back in school, Ves realized that the MTA basically attempted to indoctrinate the values related to the mech designer's creed into every prospective mech designer's moral fiber.

The mech industry would truly be an awful sight if mech designers stopped working in the best interests of their clients. Something like that already took place in the frontier.

Ketis frowned. "Still, does this even matter right now? Limitations aside, the Pale Dancer does the job and its wholly intact. That's just what we need, right? Who cares about growth and future potential and such. I'd be happy enough if we have an expert pilot on our side with a ready-made expert mech for when we reach the Starlight Megalodon."

She had a point. Ves had subconsciously treated Venerable Xie as a long-term investment, but the fact of the matter was that the Flagrant Swordmaidens didn't have the luxury to think so far ahead.

"I suppose if the Vandals aren't looking for a long-term replacement for Venerable O'Callahan, then Venerable Xie will be a fine addition to our reserves." He muttered. "It's a shame he lost his Meridian Echo. Even if we put him in the cockpit of a spare spaceborn rifleman mech, he will only be able to show off a fraction of his full potential. Such a weak mech won't be able to keep up with his performance."

"It doesn't have to be a rifleman mech." She pointed out. "Doesn't his profile state that he's cross-trained in many different melee and ranged mechs? You can put him in one of your Akkara heavy cannoneers if you want to blast enemies apart from afar. You can also put him in one of your Hellcat hybrid knights if you want an absolute beast of a champion mech."

"Hm, that's right! In fact.." A very subversive idea started tickling in his mind. "If we modify the old Parallax Star, we can even make it suitable to be piloted by Venerable Xie!"

Ves only threw that idea out there. He didn't actually believe the Vandals would go for it, because such an action disrespected Venerable O'Callahan.

Bastard and deadbeat he may be, the man had fought on behalf of the Vandals and sacrificed his diminishing lifespan to save his lives.

As long as he could deploy for one final time, the Parallax Star remained his personal steed.

Still, on a utilitarian level, it would have been much more beneficial to the Vandals if they simply dumped the useless old man out of the airlock and convert his wonderfully-built custom lancer mech to a new expert pilot. The only issue that Ves was worrying about was whether Venerable Xie could even make use of the Parallax Star in the first place. His low level of resonance strength meant that the lancer mech wouldn't be able to draw out its full potential.

"These kinds of issues are none of our concern." He shook his head.

"However the Vandals intend to make use of Venerable Xie once they obtain his loyalty, that's something our superiors will have to figure out."

Ves sent out his final report to Major Verle and let the man take over from there.

As negotiations dragged on, the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet accelerated towards the fleeing Rovista Splendor and her flagging supply ships. The Fire Treaders with their nimble ships and mechs easily overtook them in no time, leaving the Rovista Splendor as the only remaining vessel out of a decent-sized colonization fleet.

It was an ignoble end to the Shining Stars Colonization Fleet. The Flagrant Swordmaidens held all the chips in this negotiation. By the end of the talks, the Fourth Prince would hardly have anything left.

If not for the fact that an expert pilot couldn't be coerced into working for someone else, then the Vandals and the Swordmaidens would have straight up captured the Rovista Splendor and divided the spoils among themselves.

After some time, Major Verle opened up a private channel to Ves. He activated his station's privacy screen, cutting himself off from Ketis and the rest, and accepted the request.

"Mr. Larkinson, the negotiations have proceeded favorably on our end. It is likely that we will be able to command the loyalty of Venerable Karol Xie, not only just for the duration of our mission, but on a permanent basis. In order to welcome him to the Vandals and make him feel at home, I have assigned a liaison to induct him in our ranks. One of the issues I am considering is which ship should be his new berth. What is your view on the matter?"

"He won't be staying aboard the Rovista Splendor, sir?"

"No. We don't want him to continue to maintain his ties with the Fourth Prince. The Rovista Splendor along with her owner will in fact be sent elsewhere soon enough. We need to convert Venerable Xie to the Vandals as quickly as possible in order to prepare him for deployment when we finally reach the site of the Starlight Megalodon. Can the Venerable and his remaining expert mech be brought to the Shield of Hispania?"

In other words, Major Verle wanted to indoctrinate Venerable Xie in person if possible. It made sense as mech pilots trained as bodyguards and personal guards were pretty much indoctrinated to worship their patrons.

Reprogramming decades worth of indoctrination required an extremely intensive effort from the Vandals themselves.

It all depended on what Venerable Xie really thought about the Fourth Prince and how much of his oaths he still valued. A bot would still follow its master even if he turned out to be a loser too stupid to survive. An expert pilot might not be so unflinchingly loyal no matter how much indoctrination he went through in his early career.

Ves thought about the proposal seriously and quickly shook his head.

"Perhaps stationing Venerable Xie aboard the Shield of Hispania will make it easier for us to welcome him to the Vandals, but it won't do his mechs any good. The Pale Dancer is a highly specialized mech with an extremely sophisticated design, sir. It requires a special touch to be able to keep it together."

"Can't Chief Haine and her men perform some basic upkeep? I'm not asking for you to update its design. The mech is sufficient for our needs at its current state." Verle raised his eyebrow.

Ves immediately shook his head. "Chief Haine and her mech technicians may be some of the best of their profession in the mech regiment, but they aren't trained to service custom mechs, sir. Any work that needs to be done on the Pale Dancer and any other customized mech you want to assign the Venerable can only be done by myself. And I'm warning you that the Pale Dancer urgently requires some modifications because as robust as it is, several of its components aren't rated to withstand a heavy gravity environment."

This news basically ruled out the possibility of stationing the Pale Dancer on the Shield of Hispania.

"Then.. the only choice of berth that remains is the Gorgon's Gaze." Major Verle surmised as he scratched his chin. "Do you think the crew of the ship is up to hosting the Pale Dancer?"

Ves grimaced a bit as he recalled the people assigned to service the Parallax Star. "I'll be honest with you, sir. I don't like Miss Lisbeth Eta-Denmerksen's spendthrift ways and the way Chief Leo Keys acts like a total doormat to her demands. However, they are perhaps the only mech designer and chief technician in our fleet that aren't occupied with any existing duties right now,

and they also possess the right qualifications to service an expert mech such as the Pale Dancer."

"Hmm.. I understand." Major Verle nodded. "I will make the appropriate arrangements. However, I would feel reassured if you spend some time with the Pale Dancer yourself. If Miss Eta-Denmersken is as unreliable as you say, then you will need to take charge of the modification process."

"You want me to transfer to the Gorgon's Gaze, sir?" Ves asked with mild alarm.

"In fact, I am ordering you to. Pack up your bags and shuttle over to the Gorgon's Gaze. Prepare to receive Venerable Xie and the Pale Dancer, and work as fast as you can to harden his custom mech for high gravity environments. Are you clear of your assignment, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Understood, sir." Ves sighed. "I will transfer over immediately."