

Mech 3941

Chapter 3941 Shortcomings of Brawler Mechs

Venerable Vincent was so adamant on his two requirements that Ves hadn't been able to change the strong-willed expert pilot's mind.

Ves let out an exasperated breath. Expert mechs were powerful and exciting machines, but the people attached to them weren't always as easy to deal with. He much preferred to work with mechs which were always more compliant and understandable.

After arguing with the new expert pilot for over five minutes, Ves realized that Vincent's burning desire to pilot an expert brawler mech was not a passing flight of fancy.

It had become an obsession ever since he defeated his most formidable enemies by crushing them with his punches!

Many warriors were like this. They did not pay attention to logic and reason. They just let their personal opinions and experiences tell them what was best!

Right now, Venerable Vincent was absolutely convinced that he was born to pilot the most physical humanoid mech type imaginable, which happened to be a brawler mech!

Suffice to say, Ves was not as enthused with this idea. It was all well and good for the end user to demand a complete change in mech type, but it was the mech designers who had to do all of the work!

The design and engineering challenges of realizing this transition were much more troublesome than performing a more straightforward upgrade.

Still, once Ves verified that Venerable Vincent was truly willing to commit to piloting an extreme melee mech type, he resigned himself to this outcome.

Ves consoled himself with the fact that Gloriana would be leading this troublesome design project. He had long made an agreement with her that she would take responsibility for most of the Larkinson Clan's custom mechs and expert mechs. It was up to her to resolve all of the difficult technical issues that he could foresee.

Besides, upgrading a custom mech to an expert mech already necessitated a complete overhaul. It was not wrong to say that Vincent's old mech would undergo a complete rebirth.

Such projects happened to be a great opportunity to make radical changes to the original configuration! It was not impossible to transform a custom hybrid mech into an expert brawler mech!

The design project might even serve as an interesting opportunity for Gloriana to exercise her design skills.

As Ves thought about the steps the Design Department needed to take in order to realize Venerable Vincent's vision for his so-called C-Man, he quickly drafted a more comprehensive project plan in his mind.

The Larkinson Clan just happened to retain numerous lead designers with specializations that were highly relevant for the C-Man Project.

His wife would be leading this project, not only because she excelled at designing customized mechs, but also because she used to be in charge of developing the original B-Man.

Not a long time had passed since she completed the B-Man Project, so all of the details to the half-wrecked custom hybrid mech should still be relatively fresh in her mind. This should grant her an amazing head-start into the long and difficult conversion process.

Ves intended to contribute to Venerable Vincent's expert mech as well, but only to the extent of tweaking and shaping the C-Man's spiritual design. He did not intend to invest too much time in the project since he had other plans.

As for other mech designers, he already reserved a slot for Professor Benedict Cortez or possibly another expert mech consultant.

If Ves ever wanted to jazz up the C-Man, he might decide to spend a substantial amount of MTA merits to hire an expensive MTA mech designer with a more rare and exotic specialization.

That left room for two more contributing mech designers.

The B-Man was already tough in its class, but the C-Man had to be even tougher in order to withstand the rigors of ultra-close quarters combat.

Sara Voiken was therefore an excellent addition to the design. She could not only grant superior defenses to the C-Man, but also grant the mech an excellent advantage in physical combat by applying her physical negation specialty!

This specialization also happened to synergize with Tifi Coslone's best design applications. The latter was best at bestowing larger and more substantial mechs with incredible physical strength.

Perhaps Tifi Coslone's importance to the C-Man Project might even surpass that of Gloriana. A brawler mech might look simple, but it was actually a complex mechanical puzzle that had to be both flexible and robust enough to perform all of the soft and hard movements that expected of this mech type.

"So what do you say, Ves? Can you do it or not?" Venerable Vincent eagerly asked.

"We can." Ves steadily replied. "Gloriana will be leading this project. She has already worked with you on the B-Man Project before, so you should already know what to expect. She will be meeting with you soon to explore in detail what you want for your expert mech. However, it will help if you can give us a more detailed image of what you have in mind for the C-Man Project. Can I ask a few questions?"

"Sure."

"Let's begin with the weapon loadout of your upcoming C-Man. I already understand that you want to turn it into an expert mech that excels at punching. While this sounds fun and all, do you realize that it might not perform as impressively as you think?"

"What's the problem?" Vincent frowned in puzzlement.

"The reason why melee mechs wield weapons is the same as humans have done the same in the past. It is too difficult for the humanoid form to safely and effectively fight unarmed. Imagine fighting against the First Sword or the Riot. While they are older expert mechs, I anticipate that they can beat your C-Man into submission. It's too hard for an unarmed expert mech to overcome the disadvantage of reach and leverage. Aside from that, Venerable Dise and Venerable Orfan both possess formidable weapon skills that allow them to make masterful use of their mech weapons. What can you do against that? Do you just expect the C-Man to storm up and punch its way forward? Dream on, Vincent!"

"Hey! My C-Man shouldn't be as weak as you make it sound!" The expert pilot protested! "I just need you guys to make my expert mech thick enough to withstand the initial blows and fast enough for it to get super close to my opponents. As long as my C-Man can get past the reach of their weapons, it can wrestle those expert mechs into submission!"

Ves shook his head in disappointment. "Be realistic. What you're asking for is impossible or impractical. If you want your C-Man to be thick enough to resist the sharp and penetrating attacks of mechs such as the First Sword, it will become so slow that Venerable Dise can easily toy your machine to death by dancing around it. If you want your C-Man to be fast enough to catch up to the expert swordsman mech, then its armor system will not possess the resilience required to prevent your machine from getting crippled on approach. Do you understand the dilemma? This is exactly why brawler mechs have never become popular."

Vincent did not want to give up on turning his C-Man into a brawler mech that easily.

"Shouldn't a mech without weapons be faster and lighter than one that does carry one? Why do you make it sound as if this is not the case."

"Because it's the arms that have become its primary weapons, Vincent. Your C-Man will feature thicker and heavier arms in order to prevent them from collapsing as soon as you launch a powerful momentum-filled punch. Brawler mechs are similar to lancer mechs in that sense. The biggest difference is that lancer mechs have excellent reach with their long weapons while brawler mechs earn the lowest score in this aspect."

"Then forget about speed! I don't need an expert mech that moves as fast as the Dark Zephyr. It just needs to be agile enough for it to wrestle. If punching alone isn't enough to defeat a tough opponent, I want to be able to grapple and wrestle it. Can you do that?"

"It's possible, but it will force us to make several compromises in other areas. I will let Gloriana explain this to you in further detail." Ves answered. "That said, I still anticipate that your C-Man will turn into an inadequate expert melee mech if we stick to this concept. It's too barebones. Won't you reconsider turning it into a hybrid mech again? Your C-Man will be able to contribute much more substantially in battle if it comes with integrated ranged weapons."

"No." Vincent shook his head. "Don't get me wrong. I like hybrid mechs. I especially like them when they're strong. I spent some time with Patriarch Reginald Cross who I admire. His Bolvos Rage can make any man wish he could pilot it instead. I just don't want to deal with all of those weapons. I have fought with so many different weapons over the years that I became confused for a time. Now that I have become an expert pilot, I want to put an end to that and stick to a single fighting approach going forward. I really like how Venerable Dise has always stuck to wielding greatswords and turned her First Sword into the strongest dueling machine in the Larkinson Clan."

"I understand your motivations, but your decisions aren't practical if you stick to an expert mech without weapons. There are too many disadvantages. For example, you might be able to punch enemy mechs with your C-Man, but you can forget about inflicting effective damage against large opponents such as phase whales and alien starships. They're too big for you to defeat, Vincent."

"If that's the case, why not equip my C-Man with weapons?" The new expert pilot suggested. "Can't you design a pair of mech-sized boxing gloves or something that can protect and add more power behind its punches?"

"That... is not a bad idea." Ves admitted.

He did not expect that Vincent would be bright enough to make useful and relevant suggestion for an upcoming design project!

His imagination already went wild. He visualized an expert brawler mech that was designed in a way so that it could mount 'gloves' that added a lot of necessary mass and protection!

Vincent already became enthused about this idea. "Why not design multiple glove weapons while you are at it? This way, I can choose which ones I want my C-Man to equip based on who I'm about to fight!"

The request added additional workload to the design team, but it also made the design project more interesting.

"I can opt for a pair of boxing gloves as a general solution and when I just feel like punching my enemies to death."

"I can go for a pair of grappling gloves that are good at gripping if we're fighting against strong and powerful expert mechs. No matter how well they can fight, I bet they were never designed to wrestle!"

"If we're fighting against biomonsters such as fish-whales, I need a pair of gloves with long, sharp claws so that I can cut through all of the fat and slice the organs into pieces!"

"Maybe in the future you can design more exotic gloves that are made out of weird but powerful exotics. I want a pair of gloves that can add flames to my punches. I want a pair of gloves that are good at breaking through energy shields. I want to be able to punch my enemies silly in a hundred different ways! Wait, can't you design a pair of gloves that can do all of that without needing my expert mech to switch loadouts? It would be like the Everchanger, but for glove weapons! This is the perfect idea! Let's call it the Everpuncher! No wait, should we call it the Punchanger instead?"

Ves raised his palm. "STOP! That's enough, Vincent! We can explore all of these ideas in the future, but for now we should start with a solid foundation. It is enough to settle for just a basic pair of gloves in order to see whether this weapon concept even works for the C-Man."

Chapter 3942 Raising the Stakes

After an extensive talk that sometimes went off-track and turned absurd, Ves developed a basic profile for the C-Man that Venerable Vincent found agreeable.

The expert brawler mech that Vincent wanted to fight with in the future did not completely get rid of all of the traditional shortcomings of its mech type.

Allowing it to equip different types of gloves substantially increased its viability in combat, but it was up to the expert pilot to maximize their potential.

"An expert mech is only as good as its pilot." Ves warned the over-eager man. "Just like how the First Sword is an absurdly strong duelist due to the strength and skill of Venerable Dise, it will be up to you to transform the C-Man into a fearsome melee mech

that can defeat or at least go equal to other expert melee mechs. Do you understand what I am trying to convey?"

"Hey, no worries! I'm not new to this. I regularly sparred against other Larkinson soldiers in the past! I'll just need to pick up my training and maybe learn a few martial arts in preparation for my upcoming expert mech. By the time the C-Man falls into my hands, I will show you that my performance in the last battle is not a fluke!"

"Sure sure, Vincent. Whatever you say." Ves inwardly rolled his eyes. "Anyway, I have collected enough preliminary information now. I still need to visit a bunch more recovering pilots. I will leave you here so you can continue to come up with different glove weapons for your upcoming expert mech. Just don't expect to get back into the saddle quickly. It takes time to develop a powerful new machine, and the fact that we have to upgrade your existing B-Man adds an extra burden."

"How soon can I pilot my new expert mech?"

"Well, if nothing special happens, it will probably take 8 months for us to complete this project. Gloriana might be able to complete it ahead of schedule, but don't hold any unrealistic expectations."

"I get it. I know the others had to wait a long time as well. I just hope that the C-Man will live up to my expectations."

Now that Ves developed a general idea on how the Design Department should handle the C-Man Project, he stood up from his chair and made to leave.

"Ah, wait! There's one more thing!"

"What is it, Vincent?"

"Didn't we raid a lot of phasewater and fish-whale organs from Purgatory? Why not make use of that to make my C-Man extra fast and extra uncatchable? Just think of what I can do if I can move at warp speeds! Lack of reach? Pff! As long as I have a combat drive, I'll be able to catch up to a lot of ranged mechs! There's no way these flimsy machines can defend against my expert mech's punches!"

Ves overlooked this option. He was still stuck in his old mindset to realize that his clan had more options now. The B-Man's compatibility with a minidrive happened to be high!

A brawler mech was not a simple mech, but it should offer plenty of capacity to mount an external minidrive module on its back.

The power draw of a brawler mech wasn't that cumbersome either, so the C-Man should be able to meet the substantial energy requirements of a typical miniaturized warp drive.

Still... Ves was reluctant to grant Vincent access to an expensive minidrive right off the bat. The cost of such an expensive module might equal that of the rest of Vincent's expert mech!

"We can discuss this further at a later date." Ves eventually decided to defer his judgment on the matter. "While it is true that minidrives can add a lot of functionality to our mechs, they are expensive and difficult to manage. They also impose a great degree of responsibility to the pilots who carry them into battle. If you fight carelessly enough that an enemy unit is able to destroy a costly minidrive module, then our clan will end up with a significant loss."

"That won't happen! I'll take real good care of the minidrive. No one will ever succeed in attacking the C-Man from behind! Wait, we haven't talked about the codpiece yet. Can you make it small enough so that it can be mounted on the front? You can layer extra armor on top of that and turn it into the manliest codpiece to have ever graced a mech! Doesn't that sound brilliant?"

Ves responded with a flat stare.

"That is one of the most idiotic ideas I've heard from you since you came up with the Punchanger concept. First off, the current state of minidrive technology doesn't allow for them to be smaller than a typical backpack module. Even then, their performance is not all that great. If you want to mount it to the front, I can guarantee you that it won't look as if your expert mech is wearing a large codpiece. It will make your mech look like its belly is swelling as if it is pregnant with a baby!"

A repulsed expression quickly appeared on Vincent's face. "No thanks, then! Keep it mounted on the back, then. Just make sure the look and contours of my mech looks impressive enough from the front. The codpiece for my C-Man has to be even more awesome than the one you designed for the B-Man, got it? If you can make only one part of my expert mech into a masterpiece, it has to be the codpiece!"

Ves did not even bother to say anything to that request. He quickly bid Vincent farewell before he left the recovery room.

He already decided to hand over this headache project to Gloriana as quickly as possible. He should let her deal with Vincent's inane requests.

"Nyeow nyeeooow!"

"Oh hey, Minxie. How are you doing, little darling?"

"Nyeow!"

The Persian cat padded over to Ves and rubbed her body against his legs for a time.

Meanwhile, Director Raella Larkinson dismissed her projection which she used to browse the news.

"So, are you and your fellow mech designers about to design an expert mech that will keep my man safe?"

"Uhh... the design project hasn't officially started yet. Gloriana will have to conduct a lot of research before we can get a solid idea about Vincent's future expert mech. He's pretty set on piloting a brawler mech though, so don't expect that to change."

Raella didn't look pleased with that news, but enough time had passed for her to come to terms with this development.

"This is probably the first time that Vincent is really enthusiastic about dedicating himself to a single combat approach. As much as I don't like it, piloting a mech that fights with its limbs probably fits him best. He has always been a more hands-on fighter and never built up a passion for ranged weapons."

"Ordinary brawler mechs might not be great, but don't write off our attempt just yet. With the windfall we've obtained from the Purgatory Campaign, we can invest more into our mechs than before. As long as we pile up enough expensive materials and components into the C-Man, it will be able to overwhelm the majority of its opponents by relying on brute force alone."

The woman sighed in resignation. "I guess we will have to settle for that, then. I will take anything I can get."

The two trueblood Larkinsons chatted a bit about Vincent and other matters while Ves led her to a nearby meeting room. Once inside, he activated a number of privacy functions so that he could discuss a more sensitive topic with Raella.

"I am sure you have been apprised about what happened in the battle that turned Vincent into an expert pilot."

Raella's expression turned serious. "I have. I heard that the Everchanger played a big role in Vincent's breakthrough. That's a pretty amazing feat. Can you do it again for other mech pilots?"

"Maybe. The measure I employed is... experimental. It's also extremely sensitive and could easily attract a lot of unwanted attention to us. This is why I passed on instructions for everyone to keep quiet about it. That doesn't mean that I intend to sit on this solution. I made a deal to work together with the MTA to develop my special glow further."

"What does that have to do with me, Ves?"

"Breakthroughs don't happen out of the blue. I've tried to make mech pilots surpass their limits many times before I realized it is futile to do so while they are just sitting or standing around. In order to stimulate them enough that they can smash through their bottlenecks in one go, I need them to be in an active state. More specifically, the mech pilots have to be deeply immersed in a battle they care about in order to bring them close enough to apotheosis that my glow can give them the final push they need."

Raella looked at Ves with wide eyes. The information she received was both huge and shocking!

"Why are you telling me this, Ves?! Wait, are you saying that your glow only works when mech pilots have lost themselves in a fight? If this is the case..."

"From what I have learned and seen, mech pilots are most likely pushed to the brink when they are subject to life-and-death battles. There's nothing like the threat of death and the prospect of seeing your fellow friends and family fall to encourage them to fight with 120 percent of their usual strength. Logic dictates that I should subject our mech pilots to more major battles if I want to create more expert candidates and expert pilots. The problem is that battles like these don't come by that often. The risks to our clan are too great and the losses can easily set us back by a lot. It's also hard to find the right opponent. Too weak and our mech pilots won't be as emotionally invested in the battle. Too strong and we'll get wiped out, making this entire attempt moot."

"So that's why you came to me." Raella looked enlightened. "Do you think we can simulate the right conditions in competitive mech matches as opposed to actual mech battles?"

"It's a possible theory. You're a mech pilot yourself. There were times that you cared so much about winning a duel or match that you treated it as the equivalent of a life-and-death battle, is that right?"

She nodded. "That's true, I guess, but I was really trying to become the strongest mech duelist and champion at the time. Now that I've become an executive, matches don't excite me as much as before. I'm afraid that most of the mech pilots in the Larkinson Army will treat our competitive mech circuit as more of a game than a life goal that they have to fulfill at any cost."

"Oh, I don't think it will be a problem to encourage them to do their utmost." Ves smirked. "Let's say we limit the use of this glow to the play-offs or finals of a competitive league. Our mech pilots must at least try their best to overcome the intense competition to make it this far. Does this sound like a good way to raise the stakes?"

"That can work." Raella admitted. "As long as you spread the news about this reward, I bet you that at least 70 percent of the Larkinson Army will sign up for one of our many leagues. The demand to compete will become so high that I will probably have to expand all of the existing rosters as well as open up new leagues in order to

accommodate all of the mech pilots. Even then, we still don't have the venues to host all of the scheduled matches. We don't have enough arenas!"

"We'll figure something out. You don't have to go big right away. We can go for the elite route instead. Let's start with implementing this change to a couple of leagues and see how it goes from there. We might even keep it at this scale in order to prevent too many mech pilots from breaking through."

Ves didn't want to get swamped with expert mech projects!

Chapter 3943 Smoldering

Compared to Venerable Vincent Ricklin, Venerable Isobel Kotin was a much more sensible expert pilot.

Ves had not met her too many times, but in the few times he talked to her in the past, he gained the impression that she was a sensible and rational mech pilot. To him, her personality was similar to Commander Casella Ingvar.

The biggest difference was that Venerable Isobel did not invest her time in learning how to lead and command mech troops. Instead, Isobel fully committed herself to excelling in individual combat.

From the battle footage that Ves had studied, Venerable Isobel's fighting style and approach towards combat shared a lot of resemblances to how Venerable Brutus fought his enemies. Both of them were rifleman mechs that were capable of dueling strong opponents and fared best at mid-range combat.

However, no expert pilot was a carbon copy of another one. Each of them were unique.

Shaped by his upbringing and largely peaceful time in service, Venerable Brutus dedicated his life towards protecting his younger sister Gloriana and his closest family and friends.

This caused him to develop a fighting style that was not as sharp or aggressive as others. In combat, Venerable Brutus placed a high emphasis on evasion and mobility.

Although he was capable of hitting hard when necessary, compared to other rifleman mech specialists, it was clear that he had taken a more defensive and supportive approach towards combat.

Venerable Isobel took a different approach. Shaped by the infrequent but highly consequential battles against astral beasts and alien warships, she strengthened her determination to do whatever it took to slay these difficult enemies!

The pressure she was in and the circumstances she was operating under eventually led her to a powerful answer.

Fire.

When Ves entered her recovery room in the Dragon's Den, he could clearly sense the unstable but smoldering flames of her will.

The presence she exuded was quite restrained at the moment, but he had the feeling that Isobel could easily flip a switch and increase her temperature at any time!

"Patriarch."

"Good day, Venerable Isobel. Congratulations for your breakthrough. You advanced at just the right time. Not only did you help take down a lot of Phaser fish-whales, your addition to the Hall of Heroes also plugs a gap in our expert pilot roster."

The female expert pilot's condition was not as good as that of Venerable Vincent, but she was still sober enough to talk.

"I am happy to be of service. I worked hard to advance because of that. To be honest, I don't think I deserve much of the credit. The Quint has been guiding me in person for months. Together with whatever the Everchanger had done to me, the fire that I had been trying to kindle suddenly exploded while I was trying my hardest to kill those fat-bodied fish-whales."

Ves waved his hand. "Don't cheapen your achievements. There are many mech pilots who wouldn't have made any progress if they were placed in the same position as you. The help and assistance that we have provided to you may have given you a clearer path towards apotheosis, but in the end it is up to you to do the climbing. Your success proves you possess both the talent and the willingness to work hard to attain power beyond the reach of mortals. That is commendable regardless of the extenuating factors at play."

His words successfully settled Venerable Isobel's inner turbulence. Just because she was an expert pilot did not mean she was immune to doubts and uncertainty.

Ordinary sources of pressure no longer fazed those with stronger willpower, but any problems that exceeded their strengthened tolerance often hit their mentalities especially hard!

This was not his first time dealing with expert pilots, so Ves accurately diagnosed Venerable Isobel's lack of self-accomplishment and spoke the right words to restore her pride.

He truly meant what he said. Expert pilots were all exceptional people without doubt. Ves might not always look up to them as the common folk, but he respected their ability to persevere when others admitted weakness.

Venerable Isobel Kotin might not look that impressive at the moment, but the smoldering fire of her will possessed a core of strength that made it seem as if her flame could never be extinguished!

Ves and Isobel chatted for a bit about various topics. The discussion started from her personal experiences of the Battle of Purgatory and soon strayed to the role the Quint had played in her formative period as an expert candidate.

"The Quint is... not an easy living mech to handle." The slim, dark-haired woman chose her words carefully. "It possesses an irreverent attitude towards everybody. It doesn't respect you or Casella or myself at all. It also likes to poke and challenge me all the time. There are days where I dread my live practice sessions because I know I will have to endure a lot of snarky remarks and uncomfortable questions."

Ves leaned forward. This was interesting information. "Do you get the feeling that the Quint is doing it for your own good? I can never tell whether it is doing its best or if the darned mech is merely using its mission as an excuse to have fun at other people's expense."

The expert pilot's mouth twitched into a curl. She had spent a decent amount of time interfacing with the Quint, so she knew its personality quite well.

"I think that both of what you said is true, sir. I don't know why the Quint has grown so cranky. Maybe all of those hours standing still inside hangar bays has caused it to seek entertainment wherever possible."

"Ah. I understand."

It was Ves' fault. The Quint already shared a huge list of complaints to Ves, and many of them were symptoms of boredom.

As one of his oldest third-order living mechs, the masterwork Bright Warrior spent more time doing nothing than many other machines!

Although many people had the illusion that living mechs went to sleep as soon as the pilot powered them down, the truth was that they were still active to a degree.

The higher the order, the more spiritual they became. The Quint was already an existence comparable to design spirits and was therefore more perpetually aware.

All of those times the mech remained unused must have been little different from being locked in a prison cell! It was no wonder that its personality had grown crooked as a result!

Fortunately, Ves should have already alleviated the problem a few months ago. When he turned the Quint into a design spirit for the Enlightened Warrior model, the living mech could gain additional stimulation by interacting with many different mech pilots.

Of course, the damage was already done by now. The Quint had already grown and matured in a direction where it derived amusement from teasing its mech pilots. Isobel was merely its latest 'playmate'.

Ves asked a few more questions about Venerable Isobel's experiences with the Quint. He gained a better insight on the approach the Quint adopted to accelerate her progress.

It didn't sound as if the Quint was doing anything special or extraordinary. The living mech just took advantage of the man-machine connection to understand Isobel's mentality.

The Quint already hosted several expert pilots, so it could easily make comparisons and figure out what Isobel was lacking in the most compared to her betters.

Once it identified the issues it needed to address, the living mech simply relied on its words to guide Isobel in the right direction.

This was not a mysterious process at all. The only difficult part about it was that it was difficult to replicate this process through other means. Interfacing technology could be dangerous and it was quite risky for two people to meld their minds together for extended periods of time.

The only other method that Ves could think of that could achieve a similar result was by forming design networks.

Ves briefly wondered whether he or Gloriana could imitate the Quint through the design networks generated by Blinky and Alexandria.

Now that he thought about it, he could facilitate the growth of more than mech pilots.

Perhaps he could even apply a similar methodology towards mech designers, although he vaguely felt it was not as simple in this case.

Too much guidance led to contamination. Ves did not want to ruin the dreams and ambitions of younger mech designers by substituting their visions with his own. Diversity was good for the mech industry.

"Sir, if I may ask, what will I pilot now that I have 'graduated' from the Quint?"

"Hmm, we will need to think about it." Ves replied. "We probably can't give you anything better than a standard mech for the time being. We could allow you to continue to pilot the Quint, but that will rob another worthy Larkinson expert candidate of a precious opportunity to receive the living mech's guidance. I can only ask you to be patient and bear with the situation for 8 months or more. That is how long you need to wait before we can present you with an expert mech."

Venerable Isobel began to smile now that the conversation had turned to her future battle partner. Her flaming force of will grew hotter and more active as she imagined a powerful machine that could enable her to rain down fire towards her enemies!

"What will you design for me?" She asked. "How much can I specify?"

"Your expert mech is designed solely for you, so your input is important. Our goal is to design an expert mech that is not only comfortable for you, but is also able to draw out your full potential on the battlefield. Gloriana will visit you later and conduct multiple rounds of interviews and examinations on you. She's a professional in this. With your cooperation, she will soon be able to form a mech concept and generate a draft design that should hopefully align with your piloting style and personal preferences."

"I understand, sir. I will eagerly await her visit."

"If you want, we can get a head-start by exploring your initial wants and needs." Ves suggested. "First, let us confirm the mech type of your future expert mech. Do you intend to move away from piloting a rifleman mech?"

Venerable Isobel shook her head. "I can't imagine piloting anything else. I have trained and honed my marksmanship for so long that I don't want to switch to another weapon. A part of me feels like I can perform well in an expert striker mech, but that is too drastic of a change. Forget I said anything."

It was not difficult to understand why she took a fancy to striker mech. Her domain was overwhelmingly centered around fire, so piloting a mech type that was famed for wielding flamethrowers in battle sounded like a natural fit!

However, piloting a striker mech required a substantially different approach towards combat. Isobel wasn't willing to invalidate the piloting style and combat skills that she had developed for many years.

Even so, she still felt tangled. Her mind might prefer one answer, but her heart beckoned towards spreading as much heat and flames as possible!

Ves leaned forward and placed his hand on her arm. "Hey, don't give up too soon. One of the most important lessons that people like you and me can learn is that expert

mechs don't play by the rules. Expert mechs don't have to stick to a single mech archetype, you know. Depending on the design budget, the capabilities of the mech designers as well as the availability of quality resources and mech components, it is not impossible to design a second-class expert mech that functions as both a rifleman mech and a striker mech!"

Isobel immediately became excited!

"Really, sir?! Are you truly willing to design an expert mech that combines the power of both a rifleman mech and a striker mech in a single frame?!"

"Anything is possible. It is just a matter of how much we are willing to invest in the development of your expert mech. It just so happens that we are returning to Davute with an enormous haul of phasewater and MTA merits. Our clan can afford to splurge a bit this time. Let's discuss how we can best design an expert mech that is powerful enough to satisfy your wishes but also practical enough for us to be able to deliver the end product to you in a year."

Chapter 3944 Firestarter Project

Ves was thinking about how he and Gloriana could approach Venerable Isobel's expert mech design project.

Different from the C-Man Project, the expert mech that he tentatively named the Firestarter Project was not an upgrade of an existing machine.

This was one of the distinctive conditions of any expert pilot who broke through while piloting the Quint.

It was not worth it for the Larkinson Clan to make the Quint exclusive to any mech pilots. Its unsurpassed versatility and incredible compatibility with different kinds of mech pilots made it suitable for it to continue its pilot mentorship function.

Ves never thought about upgrading the Quint into Venerable Isobel's exclusive expert mech.

This meant that the Design Department had the luxury of designing a new expert mech from scratch without any old baggage.

The downside to this was that Venerable Isobel did not enjoy a head start into developing a close partnership with an existing mech. Venerable Vincent was much better off in this regard.

It was hard to say which of these cases were better. They both came with their respective advantages.

In any case, Ves already made a few design choices in his heart. Designing a simple and straightforward expert rifleman mech was out of the question.

In his opinion, the Star Dancer Mark II that he and Gloriana designed for Venerable Brutus was a bit too boring. Aside from its exceptional evasion characteristics, Brutus' machine did not stand out on the battlefield.

While it was not necessary for expert mechs to look imposing and capture everyone's attention with their dazzling performance, Ves did not want his work to be dull.

Right now, he saw an opportunity to flex his design abilities. The Firestarter Project would probably require more involvement from him considering that he was the closest thing to an energy weapon specialist in the Design Department.

Although he was not a genuine enthusiast in energy weapons, his mastery in luminar crystal weapons inevitably forced him to play an outsized role in this upcoming expert mech design project!

Ves therefore did not plan to let Gloriana take the lead on everything. He still wanted to implement his own vision for Venerable Isobel's expert mech.

In order to help facilitate his discussions with Venerable Isobel on this technical matter, Ves used his comm to activate a projection where he used his fingers to draw a basic wireframe model of a proposed expert mech.

He started off with drawing a basic humanoid mech shape before adding a crude representation of a fairly large rifle.

"This is how I imagine the initial form of the Firestarter Project." Ves explained. At its base, it is nothing more than a spaceborn mech paired with a rifle, which is no different from what you are used to. Of course, the Firestarter Project will be made out of highly-quality materials and components which you aren't able to see right now. Its overall parameters will be at least as good as the Minerva if not better due to all of the extra funding at our disposal."

Venerable Isobel quietly studied the extremely rough and preliminary draft design. She did not understand the significance of all of the subtle design choices that Ves had made when drawing the lines, but she piloted enough rifleman mechs over her career to pick up a few basic details.

"This looks like a slim and maneuverable rifleman mech. Will there be any problems with going lighter, sir?"

"That is a good observation, Isobel. While I previously said that the rules don't necessarily apply to expert mechs, among other machines of its class, details like this can make a huge difference in how your machine is able to fight against other

machines. Before we go any further, let me ask you this question. What kinds of opponents do you most want to defeat?"

The bedridden expert pilot remained silent for a few seconds in order to gather her thoughts.

"I... know our clan mostly needs its expert mechs to defeat opposing expert mechs. That is what I was initially aiming for as well, sir. It's just that compared to expert mechs, the monsters and alien vessels we have been fighting against lately are even more difficult to defeat. The previous battle won't be the last time we fight against massive enemies, right?"

Ves reluctantly nodded. "The Red Ocean is a lot more diverse than the Milky Way. It will probably take at least a couple of centuries for the Big Two and all of the pioneers to wipe out enough indigenous aliens to minimize subsequent encounters against them to the greatest degree."

"If that's the case, our clan needs an expert mech that is much better at destroying massive targets from a distance than any of our existing machines at this level. Of the ranged expert mechs in our clan, none of them are best suited for this job. The Amaranto is mainly a sniper machine that is best at taking down enemy mechs and crippling key components of larger targets, but its firepower doesn't lend itself well to mass destruction."

That was true. Ves wasn't surprised that Venerable Isobel could tell this much. As a ranged specialist, she had made a lot of preparations for the future and studied the properties of all of the existing Larkinson expert mechs.

"The Everchanger can fight like an adequate ranged expert mech, but using its rifle is merely a means to an end to the hero mech. It is not the best in sniping enemy expert mechs and it isn't particularly good at destroying other difficult targets."

A hero mech like the Everchanger was never best at a single fighting style. That wasn't the point of this versatile expert mech. Ves was already satisfied with its basic battle performance. Venerable Joshua was more than capable enough to employ its strengths against the vulnerabilities of different opponents.

However, the downside to emphasizing versatility over power was that the Everchanger was lacking in raw firepower.

"The Minerva... is probably a good general expert rifleman mech. It can use its long-barreled rifle mode to pick off targets from afar and can switch to submachine gun mode to fight against enemies at close range. It's a shame that it also has to perform like a command mech. It could have been a much stronger combat machine if it was fully dedicated towards combat. It is still the expert mech that I would like to pilot the most out of the three."

"Oh?" Ves became intrigued. "Why would you say that?"

"Well, the Everchanger is not for me because I need to be able to do too much to do it justice. The Amaranto is really powerful at long range, but it is too slow and fragile, which makes it awful at dueling. The Minerva is much more acceptable in comparison. It can fight decently well at multiple ranges and is fairly maneuverable. It's a shame that the expert command mech's armor system isn't as good as the first six expert mechs of our clan."

Though the Minerva was far from a good fit for Venerable Isobel, her preference for it gave Ves a better idea of what she was looking for in her own personalized expert mech.

"Would you rather pilot an expert rifleman mech that is a little thicker and better armored than the one in my draft?"

"It's hard for me to decide." Isobel looked conflicted. "Well, I don't think my expert mech needs to excel at maneuvering like the Star Dancer Mark II. If my primary targets are organic beasts and large starships, then I can make do with a little less mobility. I don't want my expert mech to go as far as the Amaranto, though. I still want to have a chance of winning a duel against another expert mech."

"Understood. Let me make the adjustments."

Ves partially revised the draft and made it a little wider, thicker and more substantial. The preliminary draft of the Firestarter Project no longer looked as skinny and light than before. It actually conveyed the impression that it could take a few frontal hits and still keep going.

"Does this look better to you? The Firestarter Project will be much better at frontal combat, and the loss in maneuverability is not that bad as long as we make use of superior parts."

"I can see myself piloting this kind of expert mech."

"That's good to hear. Now that we have developed a basic picture of its defensive and mobility characteristics, let's discuss the most important element of any rifleman mech, its weapon."

Venerable Isobel studied the luminar crystal rifle that Ves had sketched in the project draft.

"This gun looks rather big to me. It's larger, longer and chunkier than the one wielded by the Everchanger."

"The Everchanger has to be able to wield its rifle with a single arm. In this case, there is no need for your expert mech to wield a sword at the same time. We can afford to equip the Firestarter Project with a larger and more powerful primary armament. We just have to make sure it remains in proportion as we don't want it to become as unwieldy as the gun utilized by the Amaranto."

The Amaranto's overall mech concept was centered around extreme firepower. The older design sacrificed every other parameter in order to amplify its single-target firepower as much as possible.

The Firestarter Project was not as extreme. Venerable Isobel wanted to pilot a mech that could deal a lot of damage against large targets but also be able to hold its own against smaller and more maneuverable threats.

This prompted Ves to design a medium-sized rifle that was adequate in multiple situations.

Though he wanted to make it larger and heavier, he refrained from doing so due to the impact it would have on its handling.

Ves tapped his finger at the wireframe model of the mech weapon. "The rifle I've sketched will be the primary means for you to deal damage in the future. You will need to tell me if there is anything that doesn't feel right to you. Is there anything you want to add to this weapon?"

"Yes. Earlier, you said you can turn my expert mech into both a rifleman mech and a striker mech. So far, we've only talked about the former but not the latter. Where is the flamethrower?"

Ves smiled. "I have been thinking about how to implement that in your expert mech. It depends on how much capacity you are willing to allocate to the flamethrower system. In this sketch, I have added it in as a secondary armament with the nozzle mounted on the wrist."

He tapped the projection a few times to highlight a few elements in red. It showcased a modest-sized flamethrower mounted on one of the wrists along with storage tanks that contained a high-density propellant.

The flamethrower-related modules weren't obvious at first. If Ves hadn't highlighted these parts, Isobel would have overlooked their presence.

She started to frown. "It looks kind of... small. Will it be effective enough in battle?"

"Bigger flamethrower modules aren't necessarily better, Isobel. I think it is better to implement it as a secondary armament. The reason for that is because you can already rely on the mech rifle to defeat most opponents. The only reason why you need to whip

out the flamethrower is if there are enemies that have come. It is not supposed to be the case where your Firestarter Project actively needs to close the distance in order to employ its flamethrower."

"I see. I understand why it makes sense now." Isobel slowly nodded. "Well, if my powers are as good as I think they are, I don't need actual fire to burn my enemies. It's enough to resonate with the mech rifle. I still think that the storage tanks are too small, though. Will my flamethrower be able to last more than a minute?"

"It depends on how much we are willing to invest in the propellant formula." Ves smirked. "There are many flammable substances with different properties. Some burn a lot hotter. Others last a lot longer. The more expensive ones are able to release a lot more heat and energy with smaller amounts of propellant. The latter is the most ideal solution, and we can afford to spend extra as long as we only use it to supply a single mech."

"What if that isn't enough?" Venerable Isobel asked with concern. "What if we're overrun by a swarm and we don't have any other striker mechs on hand?"

"Well... I guess we can add an extra storage tank that can be mounted on the back of the Firestarter Project like an external backpack module. You will have to forgo a minidrive if that is the case."

"A minidrive?"

Chapter 3945 Adjusted Timeframes

Minidrives were expensive additions to any mech. Ves could foresee many scenarios where a miniaturized warp drive could make the Firestarter Project a lot more useful, but the rationale wasn't as strong as with the C-Man Project.

The C-Man Project's case was stronger because Vincent wanted to turn it into a pure melee mech. This meant that it could not function at its full potential if it wasn't at point-blank range with its targets.

This imposed a heavy limitation on its use and made it all the more important for the proposed expert brawler mech to be good at moving around.

The need for rapid traversal was much less for ranged mechs. As long as the ranges weren't extreme, it was perfectly viable for ranged mechs of many different varieties to inflict effective damage against distant targets.

However, that did not mean that it was useless to equip the Firestarter Project with a combat drive.

Venerable Isobel could perform all kinds of tactical and strategic maneuvers as long as her effective range gained an enormous boost. Whether on or off the battlefield, it was much easier for her Firestarter Project to be at the right place at the right time!

"I can see how a minidrive can be useful." Isobel's eyes lit up as Ves shared a few thoughts about this subject. "I never dared to imagine this before, but now that we have left with a lot of phasewater in our reserves..."

Ves grinned. "We are no longer in a position where minidrives are unavailable or way past our budgets. We can choose to incorporate minidrives on many mechs. Of course, we don't intend to equip them on all of our machines, but there is a strong case for adding them to all new and existing expert mechs as external backpack modules. This way, we can add them to the machines when needed and leave them out when long-ranged, ultra-fast mobility is not necessary."

After thinking about this matter further, he figured that it was best to employ minidrives as external modules for every compatible mech in his lineup.

He might even acquire a standardized model that was universal for every expert mech. This way, the logistics of procuring and maintaining the minidrives became a lot simpler. There was no need to overcomplicate this feature any further than necessary.

He could apply the same treatment to the Phaser fish-whale organs as well, if they could even be utilized in conjunction with mechs.

After he finished exploring the possibilities of adding warp capabilities to the Firestarter Project, he bid goodbye to Venerable Isobel and departed from her recovery room.

Now that he had finished checking up on the new expert candidates and expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan, he decided to check up on a couple of other ongoing projects taking place within the Dragon's Den.

He met with Dr. Perris who was supervising the growth of an important bioconstruct over at the Scarlet Garden Department.

"Patriarch, welcome back to the Scarlet Garden." The Lifer biomech designer rose from her chair and greeted. "Are you here to inspect the Titan-3 Project?"

Ves nodded. "That is one of my goals for today, yes. Bring me to wherever it is being cultivated. I want to see how close it is to maturity."

"Very well. Please follow me to the main cultivation chamber."

They entered a large hall that was slightly dimmed. Various bots and other machines tended to several enormous pools filled with different mineral and nutrient-rich solutions.

When Ves took a closer look at a couple of the pools, he spotted that several white fleshy limbs were submerged inside of them. The liquids were just opaque enough for Ves to get a good glimpse of their enormous shapes.

He took a deep breath. "Impressive. Their sizes should already be close to what I envisioned. It's a shame that we haven't been able to finish the meat suit in time for the Purgatory Campaign. I think the Everchanger can actually brawl against the fish-whales if it was equipped with this organic wargear."

Dr. Perris looked regretful. "We feel the same way, but the production of large organic products cannot be rushed. This is especially the case for the Titan-3 Project which possesses considerably more mass than biomechs."

This was the biggest downside of biotechnology. It just took too much time to complete the growth process. Dr. Perris and the other biotech experts had already implemented many measures to accelerate the growth of the Titan-3 Project, but it was hard for them to implement more extreme measures without compromising the health and longevity of the meat suit.

These were all old and familiar problems to Ves, so he did not blame the Scarlet Garden or express any frustration.

He still felt peeved that the completion of the Titan-3 Project came at a time when he planned for the Larkinson Clan and the Golden Skull Alliance to lay low for a couple of years.

While it was not impossible for detachments of Larkinson mech troops to go out and complete various missions, the chances that the Everchanger would end up in a major battle like before should not be high.

"Since there aren't any immediate opportunities to see the Titan-3 Project in action, we should change our goals and adjust our approach towards it." Dr. Perris suggested. "Instead of growing it with the expectation of putting it to use in battle, we can use it as a prototype and a platform to test our attempts of combining conventional mechs with biotechnology."

Ves looked at the eager biomech designer. "The cost of doing all of this shouldn't be low. The budget of the Titan-3 Project is already considerable. It's hard to justify all of the money, resources and effort put into it, only for us to use it as a testbed."

"Money shouldn't be a problem now that we have obtained large quantities of phasewater, sir. I think it is worth it to perform further research in combining the organic tissue we have harvested from the Titania with the fish-whale organs that Task Force Fisherman has retrieved from Purgatory into an even stronger mounted wargear model. If the Everchanger can pilot an upgraded version of the meat suit with warp travel capabilities, it can single-handedly pose an enormous threat towards hostile fleets."

Dr. Perris had put a lot of thought in how to justify the additional resources put in this ongoing project. She painted an attractive picture of the meat suit's potential.

Ves looked at the limbs that were close to reaching the point where they could be grafted together into a single whole.

"Well, since we are about to undergo a years-long period of upgrades, expansion and reconstruction, it makes sense for us to iterate on the Titan-3 Project further. I don't want us to proceed with introducing a rushed product only for it to fail and fall apart in front of an actual opponent."

Now that he thought about it, the Titan-3 Project was still a bit of a rushed project. Ves was so eager to boost the Everchanger's immediate combat power that he prioritized speed over performance and stability.

The circumstances had changed, which meant that Ves also had to readjust his various priorities.

"Okay. Let's go with your proposal. However, before we start any further projects of this nature, I first want you to complete this meat suit so that I can see for myself how it performs in reality. Even if there aren't any good opponents in the vicinity, we can still get a good impression of its combat power. If the Titan-3 Project's potential is high enough, then I won't say no to a Titan-4 Project."

Ves continued to ask about the state of the current meat suit. According to the current estimates, it shouldn't take too long for him to see the meat suit in action. Dr. Perris had opted to slow down the growth rate of the various elements of the meat suit in order to make sure they grew properly and without any of the faults that usually plagued fast-growing organic products.

Once he finished with this part of his inspection, he bid goodbye to Dr. Perris and visited another laboratory department.

He peered through the transparent window to see a dozen or so money trees blooming under the abundant light shining down from above.

Each of them had already grown taller than his body, but the trunk and branches looked far too skinny for his liking.

Just like in the last case, the biotech experts responsible for supervising the growth of the Titania money trees recommended that they should slow down the growth pace.

Ves was tempted to do so, he didn't think it was worth the wait.

"Just keep growing them as usual. They don't look too bad to me and I just want to see whether they live up to my expectations. Once we have gathered enough data about

this batch of money trees, we can revise their designs and grow a proper batch the next time."

The long period of time he intended to spend in the safer parts of Krakatoa had given him a lot more patience than before. He was no longer in a hurry to achieve quick success. He felt it was fine to take a more long-term approach to his projects.

Once he had his fill of staring at young and hastily-grown trees, he left the department and moved all the way to one of the more central biomes.

There, he briefly inspected the tens of thousands of pakklaton captives that he intended to utilize as test subjects for his 'humane' experiments.

Now that Ves had forged an agreement with the MTA Transhumanist Faction, the T Institute should soon open up for business.

The researchers would definitely take advantage to the abundance of test subjects available on the Dragon's Den!

Although Transhumanists such as Master Dervidian were not discreet at all when it came to experimenting on captive humans, no one dared to criticize the MTA.

Ves could not say for certain whether the public would forgive the Larkinson Clan for doing the same!

Even if Master Dervidian showed that Ves didn't need to be so circumspect about human experimentation, it still wasn't wise to cross this line.

The availability of a large population of captive aliens that spiritually resembled humans was a safer and less controversial alternative!

Unlike human test subjects, there were few human organizations that would ever advocate for the rights of alien beings!

Any of them that did attempt to do so would quickly be labeled as cosmopolitans and be regarded as traitors to the human race!

Ves smirked. "We're going to have a very good time in the following years."

The bird-like aliens that were perched on the tree branches did not understand his words at all. However, that did not stop them from staring at the human on the other side of the transparent cage.

Ves activated a command that caused a few bots to seek out and bring over the test subjects of one of his ongoing experiments.

Much to his surprise, the blank companion spirits that he had initially implanted into Subject 1 and Subject 2 had gained a lot of definition in the last few weeks!

They were no longer as generic and empty as before. Days of living among the pakklatons had caused the companion spirits to take on the shape and character of this race.

It was similar to how Sharpie evolved into a more human form. This reflected the inherent feature of companion spirits to grow in a direction that best fit the needs and circumstances of their hosts.

"Interesting."

It remained to be seen where this was heading towards, but Ves already felt this experiment might yield a lot of interesting research results.

As Ves completed his inspection and sent the two test subjects, he grew dissatisfied that he only made use of two pakklatons.

The Dragon's Den contained over 40,000 alien prisoners! This was a massive collection of untapped research materials. Ves was wasting their utility by keeping them in their biomes while doing nothing special!

"I need to come up with a lot more experiments. These test subjects are just waiting to contribute to science!"

Chapter 3946 Slowing Momentum

"I never knew you were such a big deal, Jovy. Are there many Journeyman of your age who are tier 6 galactic citizens?"

Jovy responded with a modest smile as he gestured for Ves to sit at a nearby couch. "I'm a valuable prospect in the MTA due to my design philosophy. People like us are rare, but the scope of human civilization is huge. There are a lot of mech designers who have succeeded in breaking new ground. Starting out is already difficult, but making further progress is the true challenge for pioneers in their respective fields. The rights and privileges afforded to tier 6 galactic citizens are meant to help us go further with our innovations."

It did not escape Ves' attention that Jovy treated him as an equal.

As Ves took his seat, he gained a better idea how much the Association valued mech designers with high potential design philosophies. The relative ease in which he was promoted to tier 6 galactic citizenship did not diminish its value at all. From the public articles he read about this topic, the amount of humans who managed to make it to the middle tiers was tiny in proportion to the total population of galactic citizens!

While he felt it was unfair for first-raters to be born as tier 10 galactic citizens right from the start, they still needed to rely on their talent and ability to make meaningful contributions to human civilization in order to climb higher.

Wealth or powerful parentage alone could not help anyone move up the tiers. If this was the case, then the entire system of galactic citizenship would become rotten to the core.

Only those who were genuinely valuable to human civilization could climb higher through their own efforts!

From what Ves had read from a particular article, the tiers that people could reach was strongly correlated with the ability to earn MTA merits or CFA merits.

Those who were able to earn thousands of MTA merits were most likely lower-tiered than those who were capable of earning millions of MTA merits!

This was no surprise as both concepts centered around the principle that those who worked and fought for the betterment of humankind deserved to be rewarded.

The Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance did not often see eye to eye these days, but they never wavered in supporting the galactic citizenship system.

This reflected how much the Big Two valued meritocracy over the alternatives. Each high-ranking member must be a capable individual without doubt. The mechers and fleters did not wish to replicate the severe corruption that had plagued many human states and organizations in the latter half of the Age of Conquest.

The Big Two stood in direct contrast to the first-rate superstates in this regard.

While it was true that the New Rubarth Empire offered plenty of opportunities for commoners to rise to the top, inheritance was still a powerful force to those that already controlled most of the levers of society.

The upper echelon naturally wanted to protect their advantage!

In a situation where there was not much room for expansion, the rise of upstarts inevitably led to the downfall of established powers!

While the Rubarthans recognized that competition was a necessary force to maintain the vitality of the state, the major groups that always held tight to power never made way for others.

The most dominant example of this in Rubarth was its Imperial Household!

The Star Emperor and his menagerie of offspring held a firm grip of every conceivable part of Rubarthan society. Whether intentional or not, the bloodline of the Imperial

Household directly controlled many levers of the New Rubarth Empire, making it extremely unlikely for any external actors to shake the first family of this powerful state!

A phenomenon like this was long taken for granted in the first-rate superstates, but such open nepotism and appropriation of power was unimaginable within the MTA.

This was what Ves liked about the mechers. Even though they were still snobbish and stuck-up in their own way, they also held great respect for ability and accomplishments.

Ves happened to possess both of them in spades. This made him feel more at ease when interacting with the Association.

Although he still needed to exhibit basic vigilance towards a great power that could squash him flat at any time, he took comfort in the fact that the mechers were more likely to protect him than to seek his end.

As Ves settled in one of the Simile Halifax's luxurious lounges, he started to chat about trivial topics with Jovy.

However, this only lasted a minute or two before they decided to move on to more important business.

"By the way, ever since I left the Garimel System, I don't know what is going on over there anymore. Can you tell me a bit about what you mechers have done since my fleet's departure?"

"We have already broken into the pocket space that used to be known as the Royal Tomb." Jovy stated. "We already know where it is anchored, so it is not that difficult for us to breach the spatial walls. Purgatory on the other hand is a lot more troublesome to find. We initially thought it was anchored at a fixed distance from the blue supergiant star, but when our ships tried to find the pocket space, we weren't able to find its entrance so to speak."

Ves raised an eyebrow. That sounded weird.

"I thought you mechers are really good at this stuff. You have so much high technology at your disposal that finding a nearby pocket space should be easy. How come you haven't managed to make any results?"

"Our mastery of spatial technology and dimensional technology may be good, but I have to admit that the phase whales are better in this regard." Jovy replied in a regretful tone. "We have scanned the star system extensively and found no trace of the pocket space. Our current theory is that its creator implemented an automatic evacuation function that displaces the entire phase whale enclave if an emergency has taken place. Anything could have triggered it, from our heavy-handed attempts to breach into the isolated space to the outbreak of Moby Dick."

The mysterious absence of Purgatory heavily frustrated the mechers! The value of this pocket space was not low!

Not only did it still retain a lot of phasewater, but it also held a lot of fish-whales including the ancient and unique Hive King and the Hot King.

Aside from that, there were the half-derelict biolabs which still contained a lot of alien scientific accumulation. The mechers would have definitely been able to advance their understanding of the phase whale race by leaps and bounds if they captured this important phase whale enclave in its entirety!

"You still have Moby Dick, right? There's no way this giant phase whale can go anywhere now that you have put the massive creature into a cage."

Jovy briefly smiled. "That's true. Moby Dick has already provided a wealth of information and novel research results. Master Dervidian has stopped taking any calls in order to completely devote his attention to studying the creature's impossibly massive body and inner workings."

This was good. As long as the mechers felt they still managed to harvest gains from the Garimel System, they were unlikely to return and demand that Ves surrender much of the profits he gained from the Purgatory Campaign!

The events that took place in the Garimel System may be of great importance to many people, but Jovy had long lost interest in it. The Transhumanists had long taken over the star system and everything related to it. The Survivalists had other priorities.

"The Red Ocean is growing more turbulent." Jovy warned Ves. "It may be difficult for you to notice any differences, but our conquest is slowing down. The indigenous alien races are finally showing more signs of organization. Not only that, their mastery and understanding of human technology is increasing by the day. It has become abundantly clear to us that there are human traitors among us who are deliberately leaking our tech and intelligence to the native resistance forces."

Ves grew grim when he heard this news. Strengthening humanity's enemies was a completely deplorable act! Wasn't it enough to allow every human to find a second chance in the Red Ocean? Why were there idiots out there who wanted to spoil this game for other humans?

"What does this mean for someone like me, Jovy? All of this sounds too far away for a simple pioneer like myself."

"You won't experience any direct consequences, but the changing situation at the front will produce a lot of ripple effects. It is likely that the density of pioneers and colonists in every zone will rise sharply in the following years and maybe decades. Groups who originally prepared to colonize the deeper regions of the Red Ocean can't follow through

with their plans if the spaces are still in alien hands. That means that their colonization fleets will settle for star systems in existing occupied territories such as Krakatoa."

"Ah. That's going to be a lot of trouble."

A sharp rise in pioneers and colonists exacerbated many of the problems that Ves and his clan were suffering from. The demand for goods and services would probably skyrocket even further while the supply of them would not be able to keep up. That meant that prices would get even more ridiculous while access to essential products such as starships became even more restrictive!

Fortunately, the expeditionary fleet was heading back to Davute with an immense haul of phasewater and MTA merits. While an abundant amount of wealth could not solve every problem, a lot of barriers that hindered Ves before no longer bothered him anymore.

This was the privilege of being rich and powerful!

His mentality towards many of the problems that used to plague him a few months ago no longer fazed him in the slightest. Compared to all of those poor and impoverished pioneering organizations that had already exhausted much of their wealth and resources to afford passage into the Red Ocean, the entire Golden Skull Alliance had already overcome the difficult initial period!

Ves relaxed once he realized that the changing trends might not be a bad development for his clan. "It sounds like Krakatoa will become a lot livier in the coming years. More and more star systems will get colonized while the amount of forces exploring or rubbing against each other will rise as well. This is a great opportunity to sell a lot of mechs and build up my brand in the Red Ocean!"

"Hehehe. Well, you are not short of ambition, I can tell you that." Jovy chuckled. "Seriously though, if we can't defeat the alien opposition quickly, the conquest of the Red Ocean will not stop, but it will certainly turn into a more drawn-out affair. Dealing with alien forces will become a fact of life in this dwarf galaxy for a long time. You should be more prepared for that. We still don't know what the human traitors will do next to frustrate our progress."

"Don't you mechers and fleeters have a lot more mechs and starships at your disposal? I don't believe that you have exhausted all of your reserves for this invasion."

"You may be right, but this worrisome development is exactly the reason why we should hold back even more." Jovy explained. "If we stretch our warfleets thin, we might not be able to respond as well to an attack from an unexpected direction. We would rather slow down our ongoing invasion than to leave ourselves open to nefarious actors within human civilization."

The Big Two as a whole no longer considered their alien neighbors to be their greatest threat.

What the MTA and CFA were truly worried about was their fellow humans!

In this day and age, the strongest threat to every form of life in the Milky Way and the Red Ocean was not the phase whales or the voribugs, but humanity itself!

Chapter 3947 Exceed Expectations

Ves sensed that a lot of funny business was going on at the top. He vaguely suspected that the Five Scrolls Compact may have been responsible for this mischief.

The Compact still bore a huge grudge towards the society that had rejected it. Though the Crown Uprising that initially took humanity by storm was already beginning to fizzle out, it still showcased the enormous power and influence this secretive organization still possessed!

Even the loss of countless sleeper agents did not seem to faze this shadowy cult in the slightest!

The Gate Consortium may have performed extremely strict checks in order to ensure that no terrorists passed through the beyonder gates, but Ves had no confidence that these security measures could actually stop the third-most powerful human organization in existence.

Colluding with aliens sounded exactly like what the Compact cultists would do! They were crazy enough to cross any bottom line and violate any taboo as long as it advanced their interests!

In fact, some of the worshippers of the Holy Scrolls were so irrational that they didn't even need a reason to betray humanity. They were the true madmen that people ought to fear!

Though Ves was curious to learn more about what was going on at the front, Jovy did not share any further information about the ongoing invasion.

"Our unseen enemies may be trying to fool around, but that doesn't mean that our Association is doing nothing. We have many ways to respond to these major developments." Jovy confidently stated.

"Well, good luck with that. I hope that all of these messes will get cleared up soon."

They soon moved on to discussing a more vital topic.

First, Jovy activated his comm and initiated a transfer.

Ves looked at his own comm as it sounded a beep. When he activated it to see what had changed, his eyes almost popped out of their sockets!

The amount of MTA merits in his name had changed!

According to the log, he only retained 1,025,342 MTA merits just a while ago. He used to possess a bit more but spent tens of thousands of MTA merits on various high-tech gadgets and minor services in the past few months.

Now, he gained 216,140,000 MTA merits on top of that, which was an astronomical sum even for a Master Mech Designer!

"I have a total of 217,185,342 MTA merits!"

His mouth went dry as he carefully verified the numbers. He performed the math in his head and with the help of his cranial implant in order to make sure that he was not a single MTA merit short!

Although the sums were correct, Ves noticed a discrepancy in the amount of MTA merits he received.

While he would never say no to free MTA merits, he distinctly remembered that he should have received less. Had the mechers changed the exchange rate?

"Why did I receive 5 million MTA merits more than what I am supposed to receive according to the contract that I have signed with Master Dervidian?" Ves suspiciously asked.

"Do you remember the other MTA mission that you accepted a while ago? You promised to help a number of our mech pilots break through to expert pilot."

Ves stood up straighter. "Ah, that's correct! Isn't it too soon, though? There are still a couple of years left for me to complete this mission. After several years, only 5 of the 20 MTA mech pilots have achieved their breakthroughs, and they only managed to advance to the rank of expert candidate. A few of them have even died in the last battle!"

"All of that is true, but what you have done is already enough to satisfy our expectations." Jovy smiled. "Isn't this great? You don't have to toil and trouble to make the rest of our mech pilots break through. We have lifted a weight off your shoulders. Not only that, but we have increased the reward despite the limited progress that you have achieved up until this point."

All of this sounded too strange to Ves. The MTA never made it easy for others to take advantage of it. How come it suddenly took the initiative to conclude this mission early and award him a bonus?

Seeing that Ves still couldn't accept this answer, Jovy provided a more comprehensive answer.

"Now that the Transhumanists are able to experiment with your so-called transcendence glow by themselves, they want to conduct much more thorough studies on its effects. In order to gather more data and make better comparisons, it is important that we gather back the mech pilots that have been exposed to the methods of your Larkinson Clan for a while. Does that clarify the situation?"

Ah. That made a lot more sense. If Ves was in their place, he probably would have made the same decision.

Jessica Quentin and the rest of her band had spent so much time with the Larkinson Clan that their chances of breaking through may be greater than other mechers.

In order to verify whether this hypothesis was true, the Transhumanists needed to make comparison studies.

"That explains you have brought back your mech pilots, but why the extra MTA merits?"

"Oh, that's simple. It is both a reward for exceeding our expectations and also as a form of compensation."

"Compensation? For what?"

"We have taken the initiative of teleporting the Enlightened Warrior mechs away from the hangar bays of your ships. We need them as well, you see."

"...Feel free to take more."

"We already have enough."

Normally, Ves would feel pissed if he heard that the MTA 'borrowed' his possessions for an indefinite period of time yet again, but this time was different.

The mechers generously awarded him with a bonus of millions of MTA merits!

In other words, Ves effectively sold a batch of average second-class living mechs at a price of several hundred-thousand MTA merits each!

The only way for him to obtain more MTA merits by surrendering a mech was if he submitted a masterwork mech to the Association!

It was no wonder that Ves felt pleased with this situation!

The only regret was that Ves lost possession of five of the damaged Enlightened Warriors that had experienced the breakthroughs of their pilots. This made them a lot more valuable than normal as they had come much closer to the threshold of a third order living mech than before!

As long as these precious mechs grew a bit more, they would gain a lot of self-awareness and become existences that were similar to the Quint.

Ves already intended to utilize them as training mechs for the Larkinson Clan. Now, the MTA's robbery forced him to shelve this ambitious plan.

His expression soured a bit. Now that he thought about it, the MTA might have gotten a greater bargain out of this transaction than himself!

"Ahem, on second thought, forget what I just said. I don't intend to produce any further copies of the Enlightened Warrior. Don't get me wrong. It is still a good mech. I just think I can do much better. I already plan to design a training mech that excels at teaching mech cadets."

"I look forward to seeing whether your work is transformative enough to make a difference, Ves. However, do keep in mind that you still need to maintain a lower profile. It is one thing to help mech cadets acquire the skills they need to win their future battles. It is another thing to design a mech that can significantly lower the threshold of breaking through. The former is a helpful addition to the mech market while the latter is a game breaking innovation."

"Don't worry. I understand how far I can go. I am still committed to maintaining a lower profile, though within reason. I am well aware that I am not strong and established enough to challenge the powerful interest groups that have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo."

"It is good that you are aware of the risks and dangers of your actions. Your tier 6 galactic citizenship will help you cope with them, but ultimately you need to rely on yourself to stand up on your own. You need to grow up faster, Ves. An entire new world will open up for your design career once you have successfully realized your design philosophy."

"I know, I know. Advancing to Master is not as easy as you say, especially with a design philosophy as new and unexplored as mine. I'm not a freak like the Polymath."

The Polymath had set an impossible record that no one ever thought they could surpass. A legendary figure like her only came once every millennium, if not longer. More normal people could only despair and set their targets lower.

Now that Ves confirmed that the MTA hadn't made an inexplicable transfer error, he fully accepted the huge windfall of MTA merits that had fallen onto his lap.

Even though he already received a promise from the MTA that he would get over 200 million MTA merits in the near future, his worries had fully disappeared now that the transfer had actually taken place!

No third parties or rival factions had shown up in order to spoil the transaction. This caused Ves to sigh in relief.

After calmly accepting the MTA merits, the conversation finally moved on to the most important item on the agenda.

"It's almost time for you to complete one of your commitments." Jovy said as he grew more excited. "I've already received permission from the higher ups to obtain a companion spirit. In fact, you should have operated on me aboard the Paracelsus Optimus where the facilities are great. Too much has happened for us to proceed, though. The new plan is to wait until your fleet has returned to the Davute System before you perform the operation. We need you to do it in a well-equipped operating room in order to make sure we gather as much data as possible."

What Jovy didn't say was that the high-quality lab and medical equipment could also assist with saving his life if Ves somehow botched the operation!

"That is understandable. Would you like to explore the possibilities that you can choose for your companion spirit? Ves asked. "I spent months thinking about the options that I can present to you. I can make many different companion spirits, you see. Each of them can excel in different areas depending on how I configure them. It's kind of like designing mechs but much more abstract and dependent on the 'raw materials' that I have access to. I don't have a large variety of the latter, so your choices are not unlimited."

"From what I have been able to understand, many of these 'companion spirits' have relations to your 'design spirits', correct?"

"That is right. You should already be familiar with the different design spirits that I have used to empower my mech designs. Do any of them stand out to you in particular? Do you fancy their glow effects or agree with their principles?"

The pale-haired MTA Journeyman fell in thought.

"It's difficult to say. I think it is easier for me to tell you which ones do not fit my needs or style. Obviously, I do not wish to have any relations with the Superior Mother despite the apparent strength she has shown. I do not think it is wise for me to have any relations with any overt alien existences for obvious reasons."

"That... substantially limits the options that I have prepared for you. A few of them can be quite powerful or useful. For example, I am sure I can bring a companion spirit to life

that can assist you with multitasking if I use an ingredient derived from the large astral beast we encountered in the past."

"While I admit that sounds useful, maybe you can offer me a better option. Please proceed with presenting the choices that I can make. I have waited long enough for this day!"

Chapter 3948 Future Companions

"Companion spirits can change your life depending on what they can offer to you." Ves explained to Jovy. "They start off relatively weak but will quickly grow and adapt to your needs. It will take a lifetime for them to become formidable, but once you have reached this stage, you will find that you are much more individually capable than any of your peers!"

Ever since Ves arrived on the Simile Halifax, he had been waiting to present his friend and ally with dazzling possibilities.

Though Jovy's latest demand reduced the amount of choices that he could make, there were still a lot of ways that Ves could satisfy the MTA Journeyman!

The importance of providing this service could not be overstated. The more Ves interacted with the MTA, the more he valued the allies he made within this massive organization.

There was no way that Ves could navigate his relationship with the Association and its various factions smoothly if he did not have a trusted and reliable source of contact!

Ves may have managed to forge a good relationship with Master Willix, but the woman had not followed him to the Red Ocean. It was far too difficult to leverage this relationship now that they were separated by hundreds of thousands of light-years.

He wasn't that particularly close to the other mecher personalities that he had encountered since he entered the Red Ocean.

People like Master Dervidian may treat Ves nicely due to the value he provided, but their relationship was actually quite utilitarian.

Ves needed the help of an insider to actually convey what the MTA actually thought about him and what it was doing. There was no way he could easily obtain such valuable intelligence from acquaintances.

The existence of Jovy perfectly met his needs.

Jovy was younger than all of those older Masters who only had benefits and tradeoffs in their eyes.

He was also a Journeyman at the same level as Ves. Although their design philosophies differed, their journeys and struggles were roughly equivalent to each other.

That not only allowed them to understand and empathize with each other to a greater degree, but also presented them with the possibility of growing stronger together.

If both of them ever advanced to Master, their friendship would definitely be incredibly close due to all of the years they had known each other!

Due to this, Ves attached great importance to his gift to Jovy. A companion spirit could truly change one's life for the better, but the usefulness of a living spiritual construct was dependent on many factors.

Ves did not wish to botch this up by saddling Jovy with a relatively redundant companion spirit.

"I've created several different proposals based on the goals you wish to pursue and the problems you need help with solving." He continued to explain. "You can think of it as having access to a trusted and competent assistant that can keep up with your growth. This effectively allows you to overcome challenges by cooperating with yourself."

"I understand. Can you give me an example of what I can acquire?"

"Hmm, okay. Let's start with a relatively simple companion spirit." Ves waved his hand and activated a projection, which depicted the small form of an inspiring-looking flag.

He had based this 'companion spirit' on Rion Aaden's Banner of Vulcan.

Of course, Jovy's spiritual flag depicted the emblem of the MTA instead of any dwarven symbolism.

"I have tried my best to make it so that it conveys a touch of the design spirit it is based upon. Can you feel it, Jovy?"

The other man slowly nodded. "I do. The sensation resembles the glow of your bestselling Desolate Soldier model."

"Don't be deceived by its simple looks and effectiveness. It can inspire duty and loyalty in your fellow mechers and other people. It will be a lot easier for you to exercise your authority and get taken seriously by the masses. In the beginning, its effects will probably be little different from the glow of a Desolate Soldier. However, the more you use it for a particular purpose, the better it will be able to do its job. Perhaps you can one day use your companion spirit to obtain the allegiance of millions of your peers. You can also do it to convince your strongest opposition to work for the greater good of mankind."

Though Ves had no idea whether this proposed companion spirit could actually fulfill his exaggerated boasts, it was nice to dream!

Jovy didn't look impressed, though. He crossed his arms and shook his head.

"I am a mech designer, not a bureaucrat or politician. I don't need to rely on a companion spirit to inspire people to do their jobs. I can rely on the reputation, prestige and power of our Association for all of that! Besides, leading people is not my primary job. My main priority is to design mechs."

The MTA Journeyman made a good point. The Mech Trade Association's reputation was ironclad. Hardly anyone dared to defy the organization. It had built up a formidable amount of deterrence power through blood and thunder.

A duty-based companion spirit was largely redundant. It wasn't even all that useful against other mechers due to their strong mentality training.

Ves shrugged and moved on to his second proposal. He swiped his hand so that the projection switched from depicting a flag to a hammer.

"This is another possible companion spirit. This time, it is much more relevant to your primary responsibilities."

"What does it do? Must it always come in the form of a hammer?"

"You can specify the shape. If you don't want it to be an inanimate object, I can turn it into a cat or lizard. Even if you have already obtained a companion spirit, you can always encourage it to evolve it in another form if necessary."

"Ah. That is good, but how does this companion spirit add to my work?"

"If you have been checking up on me, you should know that I recently started the Creation Association to help craftsmen and artisans of all kinds. This proposed companion spirit can help unlock your creativity and help you generate new ideas for your work."

This sounded much more interesting to Jovy!

"I have seen how one of your glows can help you design and fabricate a mech much better than normal. You have an odd habit of hitting your head with a hammer just before doing that. Do you expect me to do the same with this intangible hammer?"

"Uh, that won't be necessary." Ves quickly replied. "The two of you will be tied for life. Your companion spirit is like a second half of yourself. You can directly affect each other without doing anything physical."

"That's reassuring, but... if I want to enjoy this effect myself, why don't I get a similar hammer to yours?"

Ves responded with a restrained smile. "There is only one hammer like it. I do have totems that can give you a weaker version of its effects, but they're not the same. This proposal is actually extremely generous on my part because I am giving you permanent, life-bound access to a companion spirit that can massively increase the quality of your output."

The biggest problem with this companion spirit was that it was potentially able to wield the power of Vulcan while not being tied to the incarnation!

There were lots of potential problems that could result from this, but Ves didn't care about them at the moment.

If Ves truly wanted to cultivate a close bond of trust with Jovy, then he needed to show a lot of sincerity.

For his part, Jovy genuinely looked conflicted. He felt an enormous attraction to a companion spirit that could inspire him to design better mechs and help him fabricate higher-quality machines by hand.

It was difficult for many mech designers to remain calm in the face of this temptation!

Jovy was not an average person, though. His mentality was a lot more stable than that of others. He was even sober enough to recognize the potential downsides to this companion spirit.

"This is a good option, but I am accustomed to relying on myself to recognize and solve any technical issues that I encounter in my work. I feel as if getting a new hammer that can solve many of my design problems will affect my own design abilities. It would be fatal for my design career if I develop a dependency on easy solutions. I don't need that much help in progressing my design philosophy."

"Understandable. That is also the same reason why I try to keep calm and collected."

The potential utility of the hammer companion spirit was high, but the pitfalls were a lot deeper as well. Jovy wanted to rely on his own capabilities to make progress and become a better mech designer.

This was a noble attitude and one that Ves could agree with. However, that also left him with less options than before.

Given Jovy's particular demands and preferences, Ves decided to present a risky and fairly dubious option.

He waved his hand again, causing the projection to display an eyeball.

"This is another companion spirit with higher potential than usual." Ves said. "I designed it in light of what I have learned about your design philosophy and your work."

"Oh?" Jovy grew a lot more intrigued. "Please tell me more. How does this eyeball companion help me manipulate probabilities."

"By giving you the answers in advance."

"Pardon?"

Ves smirked. "The concept is simple. I know that you have probably become good at judging how a pair of dice will roll or whether a lottery ticket will yield a prize. However, I bet that you can only estimate and maybe nudge the probabilities that only you can see, is that correct?"

"I... cannot say anything to your query. Much of my work is sensitive information."

"Oh. You can keep it general, then. Let's say that my guess about your design philosophy is right. If so, then you are wielding potent abilities that can help you avoid disasters while giving you greater opportunities to get ahead."

Jovy directed a deep stare at Ves.

For a moment, Ves wondered what his MTA buddy saw in him. Did his probability manipulation work directly on humans? Was Jovy able to recognize that he could gain great advantages by spending time with a particular second-class mech designer?

Whatever the case, Ves bet that the eyeball companion spirit was the perfect supplement to this ability!

Ves smiled. "The flaw of what you can possibly do is that probabilities can only estimate future outcomes. There are times when you make a decision that is successful 95 percent of the time, only for you to encounter failure as you end up with an outcome that only happens 5 percent of the time!"

"How can this strange eye help me with that?" Jovy skeptically asked.

"You have studied my Ylvainan mechs, right? You should already know that their design spirit has a tendency to read the future. I don't know how this works at all, but I can bestow a measure of this power to your companion spirit so that you may develop a better idea of what will happen in the future."

"How will this manifest, Ves?"

"To be honest, I don't have a solid idea. This proposal is a lot vaguer than the others because the nature of your companion spirit is a lot more difficult to understand. Perhaps you will develop a stronger intuition of which possible scenario will come true. Perhaps you can observe trends that will happen further into the future. Perhaps you become a lot more sensitive to bad luck and negative outcomes. Who knows."

"Does adopting this companion spirit also mean that I have to worship a religion?" Jovy frowned.

"Uhh... maybe. I'm not sure. Theoretically, you shouldn't need to, but it might probably help with developing the predictive powers of your companion spirit in a specific direction. I think it will be fine if you don't do anything with the Ylvainan Faith. You can just grow and develop your companion spirit in a secular manner."

Ves didn't actually know whether this could happen. The eyeball companion spirit was actually one of his riskier proposals!

Chapter 3949 Dangerous Temptation

Ves presented numerous different ideas to Jovy.

Despite the relatively limited variety of spiritual ingredients at his disposal, he knew there were many different ways to squeeze different expressions out of them. Only his imagination limited how extensively he could stretch and combine his ingredients.

Each of the companion spirit concepts he unveiled to his MTA buddy only centered around a single ability.

Though Ves could blend multiple ingredients together to create more complex companion spirits, the output was a lot harder to control if he adopted this approach.

He did not want to take any excessive risks this time. Jovy was not only his most valuable investment vehicle in the MTA, but also a promising mech designer who might turn into an extremely desirable collaboration partner in the future.

Ves did not want to bear the responsibility for ruining this bright prospect!

Just the fact that the MTA would surely make him answer for his mistakes was enough to keep him honest!

Since Jovy also served as the MTA's initial volunteer for companion spirits. Ves wanted to be extra certain that the end result was both positive and beneficial. The gift he wanted to impart had to bring immediate and obvious benefits in order to make the best possible case for further cooperation!

"...the metal eater companion spirit is a bit more special than the other ones. In my expectations, it can initially give you a much more intuitive understanding of metals and ores, which will provide a lot of help to you when designing and fabricating mechs. However, the true potential of this option is to grant you the possibility to 'eat' or 'corrode' mechs and other metal constructs. The more powerful it becomes, the more you can theoretically weaken mechs. Combined with your deep understanding of mechs, it should not be difficult for you to disable their key components and instantly cause them to collapse."

As Jovy listened to his friend Ves unveil his seventeenth creative idea, he had gone past the point of feeling surprised and shocked.

Now, all he felt was absurdity.

Yes, absurdity.

He heard so many fantastical and ridiculous premises from Ves that Jovy no longer bothered to question whether the Larkinson Patriarch was exaggerating the power of companion spirits anymore.

There were so many boasts and descriptions of powerful abilities that Jovy just assumed that he would be able to wield these powers, if not today then in the future.

Although a lot of these powers sounded like outright magic, who was Jovy? He himself mastered an elusive aspect of quantum mechanics in advance and was able to affect reality to an extent!

This remarkable accomplishment was also why he successfully became a key training prospect in the MTA.

Having met and exchanged with many remarkable mech designers and mech pilots, Jovy's awareness and cognition of the more extraordinary side of reality was broader than many other people.

Besides, the Simile Halifax accompanied and monitored the Larkinson Clan for such a long time that Jovy already knew a lot about what Ves was capable of. The possibilities presented by the proposed companion spirits were not too far removed from his existing works!

As Ves was about to reveal his eighteenth companion spirit concept, Jovy interrupted his friend by raising his palm.

"Enough. I think I've heard enough. These ideas all sound interesting, but I think you are increasingly grasping at straws the further you go down your list. I mean, a companion spirit that can eat metal? Really?"

Ves responded with a mysterious smile. "A few weeks ago, a gigantic projection of a golden man punched a whale."

"That's a special case and you know it. Unity of Man and Machine is an exceptionally rare and powerful outburst of power generated by the perfect resonance between a mech pilot and a mech. What you are talking about here is the notion that a relatively small, human-bound psionic construct can directly sabotage mechs."

"Maybe not at the start, but I'm sure your companion spirit can become a nasty enemy of mechs once it has grown for a century or so. If you manage to advance to Master Mech Designer at this time, then that is even better!"

"There is little point for a mech designer like myself to acquire the power granted by such a companion spirit." Jovy responded with a hint of disdain in his voice and expression. "I am part of the greatest human organization in existence. My status in the Association is not low either, or else I wouldn't have been promoted to tier 6 galactic citizenship so soon. You might not be able to see it, but I am protected round the clock. I also have teleporters and other escape measures at my disposal. As long as there is any hint of a credible risk to my life, I will quickly be ushered back to a stronghold. I do not need an ability that can weaken mechs. We have tools and production equipment to do that in our stead."

"I guess you're right." Ves awkwardly smiled. "Perhaps I was projecting myself too much in your place when I came up with these potential ideas. I would love to have them myself, you see. I guess I would rather have more power in my own hands rather than depend on equipment and guards that might not always be as reliable or available as I wish."

"That is an odd opinion coming from a mech designer such as yourself. I would have thought that you would place a lot more confidence in mechs such as your Everchanger."

"The Everchanger and my other works are strong, but what is the point when I can't bring them everywhere I go? Look at me right now. You have teleported me to the Simile Halifax, thereby cutting me off from all of my honor guards and my mech entourage."

"We're allies and partners, Ves. We mean you no harm."

"I trust you, Jovy, but is every mecher just as trustworthy? Tell me the truth. Are there people within your vast and diverse Association who will not hesitate to harm me and my interests?"

The MTA Journeyman could not lie in order to make his organization sound good, and both of them knew it. The Mech Trade Association was filled with too many different interests, any of which could harbor malicious designs towards Ves.

This was also why the Transhumanist Faction was so keen on suppressing any news about Ves' most remarkable accomplishments.

"I concede that your situation is indeed a lot more precarious than mine." Jovy sighed. "I am in a different position than you. I am far better protected than you, but that doesn't mean I can do my work in peace. My research projects are so difficult that I have to rely on my talents in order to progress. I also have to compete against other prospects like myself in order to obtain a greater share of merits, funding, resources and tutoring."

A mech designer must always work hard in order to make better mechs. The MTA expected the best out of its own mech designers and did not intend for Jovy to grow complacent!

Ves gained a bit more understanding of all of the pressure that Jovy was facing in his career. Although the life of an MTA mech designer was still superior to that of an indigenous mech designer, the pressure of competition was far greater in an organization that adopted a meritocratic system!

"If you think that achieving success in your work is critical, then I think you should go for my third suggestion." Ves calmly replied.

Jovy frowned. "You mean the eyeball companion spirit? I can see how well it can synergize with my existing specialization and talents, but I can also see how it can have an adverse influence on my work ethic, my results and even my design philosophy. I fear... the combination may turn me into a different mech designer than I originally wanted to become. The power of foresight, if real, is too tempting. Even a hint of it can corrupt a mech designer such as myself."

Inwardly, Ves agreed with this vigilant attitude. Prophet Ylvaine's case was a good example of how people could get lost in power.

Still, that did not mean that this suggestion was bad.

"You are different from average people." Ves stated. "You are a mecher. You have pioneered a new field in mech design. You have climbed on top of many other mech designers through a combination of hard work and talent. Not only that, but you have access to a lot of help and advice. Will you truly be susceptible to the same risks and temptations that can tear down weaker individuals?"

His words directly referenced Jovy's earlier boasts about himself.

While the MTA Journeyman did not assume an arrogant air when he was in the company of Ves, his confidence and self-esteem were actually quite high!

How could Jovy admit his weaknesses so easily? Wouldn't that invalidate his earlier descriptions about himself?

"You're not wrong, Ves. I know I am better than many of my peers. I don't dare to say that I am superior to you, but my mech designs are actually not that bad compared to your living mechs."

"I would love it if you could show me to them one day." Ves smiled.

"One day." Jovy promised. "As much as I like to heap praise on myself, that is not the point of this meeting. I need to make a choice, but I still don't know what I am getting into. Can you elaborate why you recommend your third suggestion despite its numerous problems?"

"As I have said before, the eyeball companion spirit is a great fit for you. Knowledge is power, and that counts double for mech designers such as ourselves. While I am sure your ability to read probabilities can simulate foresight to an extent, it is too much anchored in the present if my guess is right. It should also only be effective on more material and solid phenomena. What my third proposal can offer is the potential to expand the range of your information gathering capabilities. Doesn't that sound great? You will always enjoy an information advantage compared to your peers!"

Jovy frowned. "Not necessary. What of the risk factors? What of the eyeball companion spirit's relations to the Ylvainan Faith? Can you guarantee that I will not be negatively influenced by this connection?"

"Relax. I wouldn't worry so much. You are your own person. If you do not want to embrace the Ylvainan Faith, then neither you nor your companion spirit will get affected. As I have told you in the past, your companion spirit is a part of yourself. It won't convert to religion against your wishes. Your control over the other half is too strong for that. As its designer, I can program and specify a lot of different aspects about your companion spirit. If you really do not want it to embrace any faith, you can tell me to hardwire that instruction in its spiritual programming."

"You can do that, Ves?"

Ves grinned. "I can do at least that much. My control over life forms such as companion spirits is not absolute, but I can still influence their starting line and development patterns. It will be up to you to nurture your companion spirit and determine its growth direction. The ultimate point of companion spirits is that its personality and abilities are shaped according to your needs. It will never hinder you as long as you raise it well."

A few minutes passed as Jovy tried to make a choice. Eventually, he realized that he was too conflicted to make a judgment at this time.

"I need to think about this further. For now, I would like you to write a more extensive report on a couple of suggestions that I prefer. I will go over them and possibly share them with others before settling on a choice. Does that sound good, Ves?"

"There's no hurry, Jovy. We haven't even reached Davute as of yet. Keep thinking about what I have said. I am confident in my work. Each of them are solid. You just need to decide for yourself how you wish to boost your career. If you ask me, I would go for the option with the highest degree of synergy with your existing capabilities. This will yield a far greater return on investment."

"Greater profits always come with greater risks."

Chapter 3950 The Proof is in the Pudding

Ves was teleported back to the Spirit of Bentheim after a fruitful meeting with Jovy.

Of course, fruitful was just a relative term.

Though Jovy hadn't been able to make up his mind on a companion spirit, he at least narrowed down his choice to a handful of proposals.

This made it a lot easier for Ves to flesh them out and be more thorough in his descriptions. All of his ideas so far were purely theoretical. They did not exist in reality so there was no way for him to prove with certainty that his ideas would turn out the way he envisioned.

As Ves tried to think on what he should put into his report, he found it difficult to determine the accuracy of his own claims.

No matter how much he understood his own work, life had a way of upending his expectations.

There were so many variables at play that any of them could easily trigger a cascade of changes that led to unpredictable outcomes.

At this moment, Ves ironically wished he possessed a combination of Jovy's ability to read probabilities and the eyeball companion spirit's ability of foresight.

He would have been able to make much more accurate predictions of his work!

If Ves could think about the potency of this combination, then so could his friend.

Jovy was probably tempted to take the plunge and go for this suggestion, but his caution and prudence kept him from doing so. He had raised valid concerns that Ves could not easily refute because of lack of proof.

Ves suddenly froze.

"Wait a minute. If it is proof that I am missing, why don't I solve this problem?"

Nothing could stop him from making additional companion spirits!

He recalled that he had lots of alien test subjects at his disposal. Sure, the pakklaton prisoners were not humans nor mech designers, but they could at least give Jovy and his unseen superiors a solid impression on what a couple of versions of his companion spirits could offer!

The moment he came up with this solution, he couldn't wait to implement it right away!

He had to wait until the expeditionary fleet transitioned back into realspace before he could shuttle over to the Dragon's Den.

He barely issued a greeting to Director Ranya before he raced to the forest biome where most of the pakklatons were kept captive.

Although he looked like he was in a hurry, he had already fleshed out his experimental plan by this time.

Ves did not aim to reproduce the most accurate outcomes of how Jovy might turn out after obtaining different companion spirits.

It was impossible to do so since none of the pakklatons were humans or Journeyman Mech Designers.

What he needed to do was show that the test subjects who obtained comparable companion spirits were doing just fine!

As Ves looked through the other side of the transparent wall that enclosed the biome, Director Ranya caught up and reached his side.

"Are you in a hurry, sir?"

"You can say that. I need access to three test subjects. I will need a secure operating chamber to implement my ideas on them. Once I am done, you can bring them back to this biome. I want your staff to keep them all under careful observation. Track what they are doing and record everything they do. If you notice they are doing anything weird or abnormal, then set the recordings aside so that I can study them myself."

Ranya raised her eyebrow. "You have big plans, I see."

"I just want to verify my ideas. It is hard for me to foresee how my creations will turn out if I just imagine them in my mind. Since I now have access to a lot of test subjects, it would be a wasted opportunity if I did not make use of my assets."

"Will your experimental procedures put your test subjects at risk?"

Ves shook his head. He wanted to provide Jovy with a gift, not a bomb in his head! None of his proposed companion spirits should pose any direct threat towards their recipients.

"Don't worry, Ranya. We will treat them as humanely as possible even though these aliens aren't humans in the first place. Ketis warned us to treat them nicely, after all. What I am giving the lucky few will actually help them. They shall gain more abilities than ordinary pakklavons. That will make their lives a bit more interesting while they spend their time in this green cage."

"...If you say so, sir. Do you want us to pull out a random sample of pakklavon individuals?"

"No. I'm not conducting a randomized trial this time. Your institute must have researched the identities and capabilities of all of the different pakklavons, right?"

"We did, though I should caution you that we cannot be certain whether our records are accurate. We can only base our information on our examinations of their physical forms and what they are saying to each other."

"That is already sufficient." Ves nodded. "Please take out three pakklavons that resemble mech designers the most."

Ranya frowned. "You will need to clarify that, sir. What are the traits you are looking for, exactly?"

"Hmm, let's start with relatively young adults among the pakklavon race. Seek out the ones with engineering or designer backgrounds. I am aware that the pakklavons do not utilize mechs, but I believe that most technological alien races make use of smaller combat vehicles such as starfighters. Pick them out if there are any of them in our custody. If not, go for pakklavons that work with shuttles or other modest-sized vehicles."

"Don't you want to grab any starship engineers or designers sir? Their importance in pakklavon society is high, similar to how humanity respects mech designers."

Ves thought for a moment before shaking his head. "Designing and working on starships is too different. Let's find out if there are enough test subjects that match my current criteria first."

The director of the Larkinson Biotech Institute called up a projection that displayed a large list of alien captives. She put in the criteria that Ves had mentioned, causing a lot of the listed individuals to disappear.

Only a small number of individuals remained. Ves was disappointed with this as he expected an alien evacuation ship to carry a lot more talents and professionals.

"Age is the biggest problem here." Ranya explained as she tapped her finger on this particular requirement. More than a hundred names silently reappeared. "It appears that only the older and more experienced pakklavons are taken seriously as designers or engineers. The previous selections are likely outliers because their parents or other favorable circumstances have given them a head start."

"That is even better!" Ves grinned. "What I need are pakklavons that most closely match a young and talented mech designer."

Once he was happy with the initial selection, dozens of bots flew towards different parts of the biome and rudely grasped a bunch of alien individuals.

The abducted pakklavons did not look pleased at all when they arrived before Ves and Ranya!

"Cawww! Cawww! Cawww!"

Though Ves could vaguely interpret their meanings, he did not bother to listen to them. They were his test subjects, not his friends. If he became attached to his test subjects, he feared that his behavior and perception towards them would become more biased. Such a development would taint the validity of his experimental results.

Right now, he needed to apply one more criteria in order to complete his final selection. He quickly scanned the potential test subjects with his spiritual senses and grew pleased when he found enough alien individuals with spiritual potential.

Ves raised his hand and pointed at the three lucky winners.

"Take the ones that I have pointed out to a secure lab. You can return the rest of the aliens."

"Understood. We have already prepared a suitable lab compartment."

They moved down to one of the many laboratory compartments of the Dragon's Den where Ves planned to commence the spiritual implantation procedures.

This was familiar work to Ves, so he did not feel nervous at all. While operating on a person's spirituality was extremely risky and could easily lead to permanent mental damage, he was not new when it came to spiritual surgery.

As Ves went to work, Ranya and several other trusted exobiologists and medical professionals stood by and monitored the physical conditions of the test subjects.

They grew a lot more concerned when the trapped pakklavons started to shake against their restraints while exhibiting increasingly more violent and agitated life signs!

"CAWWW! CAAAAW! CAAAAAWWWWW!"

"Can someone mute the noises that escape from their beaks?!" Ves demanded. "I am trying to work here. It's a lot more difficult for me to concentrate when they are resisting my efforts to grace them with a gift beyond their comprehension!"

A remote sound dampening field came into existence which quickly quieted down the lab. Freewebnovel.com.

Ves was able to work a lot more comfortably after that. Although the pakklavons never stopped shaking and resisting, they were far too weak to hinder his work.

After an hour of working, Ves let out a tired breath as he pulled back from the center of the operating chamber.

The alien test subjects had already tired themselves out by now. They had all endured a lot of pain after Ves carved into their spiritualities and forcefully blended pieces of themselves with foreign spiritual ingredients.

Ves smiled as he could clearly see that all of his attempts had succeeded. All three test subjects gained three different companion spirits, each of which were weaker but representative versions of the ones he had in mind for Jovy.

"So what can they do now that you have operated on them?" Director Ranya curiously asked. "It would help us with monitoring them if we have a better understanding of what they have gained."

That was true. Ves studied all three test subjects for a moment before giving his reply.

"Each of them has gained three different companion spirits. Subject 3 should have become a lot better at making stuff. I want you to supply basic sets of tools and raw materials to this fellow so that he can make handicrafts or something."

"That will disturb the equilibrium of this isolated society." Ranya frowned. "We deliberately deprived the alien captives of most modern amenities and products in order to separate them from their tragic past. Giving them access to technology and allowing them to make more advanced products than wooden treehouses will lead to unpredictable changes."

"What can they do? They will still be in our grasp." Ves snorted. "Just do as I say. It is more important for us to observe how Subject 3 is keeping his hands busy."

"Very well..."

Ves moved on to the next test subject.

"Subject 4 over there is the most important one of this batch. I have given him a companion spirit that is partially based on Prophet Ylvaine."

"Can Subject 4 see the future?" Ranya looked surprised.

"That is what I would like you and your staff to find out. Monitor him closely. Try to make stuff happen within the biome that can elicit different reactions from the pakklavons. Start fires. Pour rain onto the forest. Lower the temperature to freezing levels. Whatever you do, I want to see whether Subject 4 can predict these events in advance."

This time, Ranya did not mention how much these activities would disrupt the calm and peaceful pakklavon society even further. It already became clear to her that the lives of the captives would already change beyond recognition!

"What of Subject 5?"

"She is special in her own way." Ves smirked. "Her companion spirit is based on the Titania. I predict that she has gained powers related to leadership or control. We don't necessarily need to change anything in order to see Subject 5 in action, but maybe you can try to insert other life forms into this biome in order to find out whether she can tame them or something."

"We shall do our best to implement your suggestions. We are not short of organisms on this ship."