

## Mech 4121

Chapter 4121 Director Trinsael

Professor Anton Mendoza followed up on the dubious-sounding lead that a fellow Senior had provided to him and traveled to a rural star system that was situated on the border of the Vermeer Group.

Although he did not feel completely safe and comfortable traveling to such a dubious place by himself, he was unwilling to bring any escorts.

First, the person who provided him with this tip had warned him not to attract too much attention.

Second, involving other people would increase the risk that Master Rexen would learn about what Anton was doing.

For this reason, Anton assumed a disguise and permanently wore an all-black vacsuit over a thick coat throughout the duration of this trip.

Though his choice of outfits was anything but usual, it hardly mattered as he hitched a ride on a routine cargo hauler and used self-built jammers and interference devices to hide his movements.

The planet he landed upon looked like a typical agrarian planet. The relatively modest population of the planet was largely self-sufficient, though there were scant signs of more advanced tech and elaborate facilities.

With only farming and mining as the major exports of the star system, the only serious traffic that flowed between this place and the rest of the Vermeer Group were cargo haulers like the one he just rode.

To Professor Anton, this looked exactly where someone would want to bury a secret design lab!

He shook his head and discreetly moved out into the countryside.

Amidst the farmland and the hilly terrain, he reached the coordinates that his contact had provided to him and waited to be received.

It took half an hour before movement took place. A stealth shuttle had actually managed to sneak up behind his back!

"Are you the Senior?" A soldier wearing a suit of combat armor without marking asked.

"Yes."

"Hop inside, then."

Professor Anton entered the stealth shuttle without asking any further questions and allowed himself to be strapped into the reinforced seat without any complaint.

He settled down for an increasingly longer wait as the stealth shuttle engaged its systems and flew to an unknown destination.

It soon became clear to him that he wasn't being brought to a hidden underground site.

Although the shuttle was extremely well-designed and well-constructed, the crew responsible for maintaining it had made a few mistakes that caused the interior to subtly vibrate at a certain frequency.

This was inconsequential to the shuttle's ability to remain in stealth, but Professor Anton knew enough about how the shuttle worked that he was able to ascertain that it was ascending into orbit!

It appeared his actual destination may be hidden inside a secret moon base or asteroid base.

Whatever the case, his hosts were clearly unwilling to expose anything further. The shuttle continued on its silent journey until it had finally reached its destination.

"Out."

He emerged in a small hangar bay that looked like a typical underground base on a quiet planet. It did not feature any of the typical signs that it was situated in space, which was quite clever.

Professor Anton wasn't interested in figuring out the coordinates of this secret base. He only had a single goal in mind, and if that required him to work together with a shady outfit, then so be it. At least he had a better chance of obtaining what he needed in this secret base than back in his old workplace.

As his guide brought him deeper into the base, Professor Anton quickly noticed that his surroundings were off in another way.

The metal walls were made out of alloys that he did not recognize, but could vaguely tell were much harder and tougher than usual.

Once he finally reached a large but empty metal chamber, another figure actually teleported in front of his view!

He was immediately taken aback. Teleportation technology was a form of high technology that was prohibitively expensive to second-rate states. Anton did not believe

that anyone from the Friday Coalition would be willing to install such a device in an obscure research lab when it wasn't necessary.

The fact that the people in charge exposed this tech to Anton on their own initiative gave him a lot of ideas.

"Professor Anton Mendoza. Welcome." The man in a modern pin-striped suit greeted. "I am sure you have questions. Let me clarify them one by one. You may call me Director Trinsael. I am in charge here. We have tracked you for several months now. We have observed with increasingly more interest from the moment you began to inquire about engaging in... less than conventional research."

The fact that Anton's behavior triggered a few flags should not be surprising. It was hard to hide anything in this day and age.

However, with the precautions he took, he shouldn't have been able to give himself away so soon and attract so much attention right away.

There were only a few organizations that he knew of who possessed all of the capabilities shown so far...

"Are you... part of the Mech Trade Association?"

"We are." Director Trinsael admitted with a smile. "It is quite clever for you to come to the right conclusion so easily. We are not supposed to be here, so forgive me if I decline to divulge our exact identities and affiliations. All you need to know is that we operate beyond the rules and boundaries of any regional group or state. The laws and regulations of the Vermeer Group and the Friday Coalition do not apply within these halls."

The news did not generate concern in Professor Anton. Instead, he became a lot more reassured. A secret research base that did not respect the local rules might be exactly what he needed to proceed with his research!

Director Trinsael began to explain a few basic details even as they sat down on a set of chairs that materialized out of nowhere. The casual display of advanced technology completely impressed Anton.

"You may be wondering why our Association has bothered to establish this hidden site." The Director spoke. "While it is true that we can gain much greater access to what we need in any of our sector headquarters or our strongholds in the galactic center, the risk of exposure is far greater as well. It would be highly inconvenient if our actions become exposed to rival factions. Hence the need to set up a research base in an out of the way location."

That made sense to Professor Anton. He had been wondering why the high-and-mighty MTA would be willing to make contact with him. It turned out that one of its factions thought that a state on the edge of human space was a good place to hide all kinds of sensitive activities.

Though this realization put the research base in a darker light, that only spurred his confidence that he was in the right place further!

"Can you allow me to conduct the experiment that I have been trying to get off the ground?" Anton impatiently asked.

"We can." The director straightforwardly replied. "We have obtained the original research proposal that you have submitted and found that it is worthy of exploration. Though there are many mech designers who believe it is not wise to pursue this research direction any further, we do not share the same opinion. Progress must be made in order to strengthen the position of mechs in human society. Though your proposal has generated a great amount of uncertainty, that only makes it more important for us to conduct an actual experiment. Only by generating real empirical data will you be able to prove or disprove that your attempt to strengthen an expert mech is viable."

Professor Anton felt incredibly relieved now that he finally met a group that was willing to facilitate his research!

He felt an instant sense of belonging with this secret MTA research operation.

"When can I start?!"

"Ah, not so fast, professor. I did not say that you can proceed right away. While we are able to provide you with the funding, resources and facilities needed to conduct your research, we cannot provide you with the most crucial requirement of all. Nothing will happen if you cannot resolve this fundamental issue."

"And what is that, director?"

"You need to persuade an expert pilot to come and participate in your experiment." Director Trinsael answered. "We cannot do this on your behalf as we must abide by our own rules. Only you, a citizen of the Vermeer Group, must convince an expert pilot in the service of the Blue Cavalry to volunteer in a study that might allow us to discover a new way to increase the performance of expert mechs."

Though Professor Anton initially looked confused, he eventually accepted this tangled construction.

"I will try my best to gain the cooperation of an expert pilot, but that is not enough for me to proceed with my experiment. I do not have the authority or connections to arrange a transfer of personnel."

People couldn't take expert pilots away from their assigned posts. Even if expert pilots took vacations or the like, they would definitely be followed by an entourage and a security detail!

However, Director Trinsael dismissively waved his arm. "That shall not be a problem. We have enough means to discreetly transfer away an expert pilot as long as he or she is not too prominent within the Blue Cavalry. We possess at least that much pull."

"I see."

"Remember, Professor Mendoza. We can take care of everything else, but you must be the person to gain the full consent and agreement of an expert pilot to cooperate with your experiment. This is your research and your research alone. You will bear sole responsibility for all of your gains and losses."

That was a strange remark and one that quickly caused the Senior to grow suspicious.

"What do you and your fellow mechers gain out of facilitating my research?"

"Why, it is quite simple, professor. We are interested in all forms of research related to mechs. Any innovation that can increase the performance of mechs is worth pursuing. Money, wealth and even power is immaterial to research results. Our Association exists to further the development of mechs, and our arrangements conform exactly to our mission."

Though Professor Anton gradually realized that he was being pulled into a murky vortex, he did not reject Director Trinsael's offer and demands.

No matter what the mechers were truly after, Anton's goals did not conflict with theirs. Since they both possessed a basis of cooperation, he formally agreed to all of the terms and conditions and proceeded to set up his research project while he stayed inside the secret base.

It was easy enough to put everything together with the generous assistance provided by the MTA. He was able to secure the right facilities and he could even obtain the resources he needed to fabricate brand-new expert mechs of his own design.

He just lacked the most crucial element of all, which was the expert pilot!

Fortunately, Anton was not completely clueless on how to address this crucial shortcoming. He had worked with several expert pilots over the years. Over the course

of working on their expert mechs, he became familiar with the personalities and the preferences of the different personalities.

Professor Anton recalled that one of them was actually quite disappointed that he wouldn't be able to obtain a stronger mech that carried a lot of small but radical improvements.

Even expert pilots were able to dream. Which of them wouldn't want to obtain a stronger and more capable machine? The basic ones that the Blue Cavalry commissioned to every new expert pilot were simply too barebones to generate much enthusiasm.

For this reason, Anton made contact with the expert pilot by relying on a secret communication channel that the MTA had established for his convenience.

"Professor? I remember you. Why did you call me? Is there anything wrong with my expert mech?"

"Not exactly, Venerable Stixson. You see, I have an interesting offer for you..."

#### Chapter 4122 The Ultimate Sacrifice

Anton had spoken to the right target.

After making his offer clear, Venerable Stixson immediately nodded.

"Count me in! I love my place in the Blue Cavalry and all, but I have long grown tired of this basic expert mech. It is nowhere near as powerful and exciting as the ones piloted by my more experienced peers. I don't have the patience to wait a decade before I am eligible for an upgrade."

It was easy to reel a new expert pilot into Anton's scheme.

Although expert pilots were treated as heroes and champions by the rank-and-file, the Vermeer Group as a whole did not care too much for them at first.

Those that had recently broken through were too weak and still had a lot to go before they could turn into true powerhouses.

Since the Vermeer Group had limited funding and resources at its disposal, it had to be able to spend them as efficiently as possible. It made a lot of sense not to invest too much in providing brand-new expert pilots with powerful expert mechs because the absolute increase in performance was not that much.

It made much more sense to concentrate all of those resources on a smaller group of proven expert pilots. Their formidable resonance strength allowed them to deliver much greater performance with the same amount of investment!

While all of this made perfect sense, the reality did not make Venerable Stixson happy. This was why he did not have to think too long at all before agreeing with Professor Anton Mendoza's offer!

The two were already acquainted with each other. In Venerable Stixson's experience, mech designers were always helpful towards him. He did not have any doubts about Professor Anton's sincerity.

Expert pilots were decisive people by nature. They rarely hesitated or procrastinated over their decisions. As long as they wanted to do something, they would go ahead without any second-guessing.

They were also quite sharp about judging other people's character. Venerable Stixson's intuition did not warn him that Professor Anton meant any ill will.

In fact, it was quite the opposite. The Senior Mech Designer was being incredibly earnest about trying to help him obtain a stronger expert mech!

A whirlwind of activity took place after that. Professor Anton did not know how Director Trinsael and his subordinates managed to pull it off, but they successfully arranged a series of events that caused Venerable Stixson to be reassigned from his current posting in the Blue Cavalry to a secret research group that was supposedly set up by an obscure branch of the Vermeer Group.

No one was able to identify the exact research group or government branch that authorized all of this. Most people lacked the authority to read the classified information. Those that did had no reason to pay attention to such a small dossier.

No matter what, the manipulation allowed Venerable Stixson to shake his minders and reach the same rural star system at the edge of the Vermeer Group's territories without incident.

"Professor Anton! It's good to see you again! You did good work with my expert mech even if it did not reach its full potential."

The two men embraced each other for a moment. Although the other people in the secret base were complete strangers to them, that didn't matter because they trusted each other.

Now that Anton managed to obtain the final and most important element he needed in order to proceed, he immediately initiated his research.

Several months passed by as he worked intensely on the problems that lay ahead. Many times, he had to involve Venerable Stixson by scanning his body, taking out tissue samples and performing other examinations.

Many of these procedures were rather tedious, but they were all necessary in order to make essential progress.

Soon, the big day had come. With the help of his research findings, Anton managed to fabricate an expert mech that incorporated numerous tissue samples taken from the expert pilot.

In theory, Venerable Stixson should recognize the new expert mech as his own body, thereby empowering it in a way that was different than before.

Yet when Stixson finally interfaced with the mech for the first time, the initial performance results were hardly any different than before!

Other than a minor performance boost which could be chalked up to Venerable Stixson's greater mood, the expert mech functionally did not become any stronger!

Professor Anton frantically conducted additional experiments where he adjusted the variables and tweaked the design of the new expert mech.

The data did not improve. Though Anton strongly believed he was on the right track, he was still missing an essential element that prevented his work from displaying its true potential.

"What am I missing?!"

Eventually, he had to account for himself in front of Director Trinsael.

"While I am glad to see that your research has not produced any catastrophic consequences, I am not as pleased with the lack of results. We invested in you in order to see whether you can make a difference."

"A negative research result is still a useful piece of information." Anton lamely replied. "At least you know what doesn't work."

"That hardly justifies the resources we put at your disposal and the strings we pulled to bring over Venerable Stixson. Tell me, professor. Do you have any solid ideas on how to remedy your current problem, or do we have to shutter this project of yours?"

To shut down his research project when he was still grasping for an answer was intolerable to Professor Anton!

"No! Do not pull the plug so soon!" He shouted. "I still have a way! The reason why we failed to achieve any results so far is because the measures I took to enhance the expert mech were too tame. I should have realized that it takes more than a couple of blood samples and tissue samples to affect a mech that weighs so many tons. Give me



another chance! I am certain I can produce a successful result in my next attempt! I just need your help again."

Director Trinsael looked quite intrigued. "I was of the opinion that what you have attempted is the extent of your idea."

"Not quite. I did not go far enough. You see, I feel I can go much further. The only problem is... that I cannot proceed without satisfying a set of stringent conditions."

"Tell me what you need."

Professor Anton reluctantly did so. While he previously withheld these thoughts for fear of obtaining a negative response, at this point he had nothing to lose.

Surprisingly enough, Director Trinsael did not react negatively to Anton's most extreme proposal yet. The mecher actually looked interested rather than disgusted.

"I can see why you held back this idea. It is quite... something. However, if your theories are truly correct, then this is the best opportunity to achieve a positive result. I approve, but only if you can satisfy the additional requirement."

"Leave it to me, director."

It took several more months to satisfy the additional conditions. It took another couple of weeks for the new guest to arrive at the secret research base.

"Venerable Zoman. You have arrived. It is an honor to meet with you. I cannot thank you enough for the sacrifice that you are prepared to make."

The old and aging expert pilot smiled at the eager-sounding Senior. "The Vermeer Group is my life. I owe everything to it. I have always regretted that I cannot serve it anymore after I failed to achieve a breakthrough before I was forced to retire. I refuse to go out with a whimper. Rather than letting my body rot away in my home, I would rather give myself up entirely and help my fellow comrades one last time."

Both Anton and Stixson became incredibly impressed by the powerful will and conviction that radiated from Venerable Zoman's mind.

The retired expert pilot's body might be in shambles, but the man's willpower was still formidable!

Unfortunately, the Vermeer Group and the Blue Cavalry deemed it uneconomical to extend the life of its experienced expert pilots.

The cost was simply too great. It was much harder to prolong the life of a high-ranking mech pilot in general, so this service was only reserved for ace pilots and those that showed true potential in breaking through.

With Venerable Zoman's full cooperation, Professor Anton was able to move forward again.

Venerable Stixson kept the aging expert pilot company while Anton made the right preparations.

Once everything was ready, the three had gathered in the experimental chamber where the expert mech stood dormant in the middle.

"So this is it, huh?" Venerable Zoman uttered. "It doesn't look as impressive as I thought."

"I am sorry, sir." Professor Anton said. "The expert mech may not look like much, but it is the research result that will truly make a difference. As long as I am able to prove that this concept works, I will be able to apply my research to many mechs of the Blue Cavalry. That will result in the greatest benefit to the Vermeer Group."

"Ah. You are correct. Let us proceed then." The aged expert pilot said before his expression turned complicated. "I am not accustomed to looking forward to my own demise, but I feel surprisingly eager this time. How strange."

"We... will try to make it as painless as possible, Venerable Zoman. We will simply put you into a sleep where you will never wake up." Anton gently explained.

They put Venerable Zoman into a medical pod which subsequently sedated the expert pilot.

Then, the pod injected additional chemicals that slowly suppressed the man's body activity until it grew entirely still.

Anton and Stixson both saluted the old soldier for making the ultimate sacrifice in the name of science.

Hours later, Professor Anton solemnly lifted a clean and sterile skull with his hands. Even though it was made out of reinforced bone, he could still feel the echo of Venerable Zoman's will from the organic remains.

Venerable Stixson looked fascinated at the skull. "It's as if he is still alive. How is this possible? His brain and all are entirely gone. How...?"

"In the industry, we call this the X-Factor." Professor Anton grinned as he became more and more impressed at the ingredient he held in his hands! "It is a difficult phenomenon

to describe, but suffice to say it will be the key to allowing your expert mech to surpass its limits and reach an unheard of level of efficiency!"

Professor Anton quickly processed the remaining biological remains and proceeded to 'integrate' them into the existing expert mech.

As he finally stepped back from his work, he already felt that the machine that he had created with his own efforts had changed in a subtle manner.

Now it was time to test his work for real.

"Venerable Stixson."

"Understood."

As the young and still living expert pilot entered the cockpit and began to activate his expert mech yet again, Professor Anton closely paid attention to the data feeds.

As the expert mech completed the boot-up procedure and achieved resonance with Venerable Stixson, Professor Anton watched on with increasing trepidation as the numbers slowed down as they reached their previous maximums.

Once they reached this crucial line, Anton held back his breath as the performance of his 'skull mech' did not rise any further.

Then, a couple of the numbers jumped beyond their previous states!

"Yes!" Professor Anton erupted in jubilation. "It worked!"

Although not all of the performance parameters had risen after integrating Venerable Zoman's remains in the expert mech, the differences were already a good sign.

As certain parameters continued to rise for reasons that eluded Professor Anton, the entire secret base suddenly shook, causing him to wobble on his feet!

"What?!"

The base shook again, then another time, then two more times in quick succession.

For a moment, Anton became bewildered. He wanted so badly to get back to studying the incoming data, but the constant shaking prevented him from devoting himself to his task.

What was strange was that alarms had yet to sound throughout these disturbances. Not a single base employee had come and informed him of what was taking place.

As the shaking grew increasingly heavier and more violent, Anton was completely forced to put down his ongoing work.

He just managed to put on an emergency hazard suit that was stowed inside a hidden compartment of the observation room before the wall that led through the testing chamber abruptly exploded!

Venerable Stixson's expert mech immediately pulled out its rifle and adopted a defensive posture as half-a-dozen blue-coated mechs barged into space!

The Blue Cavalry had arrived!

"What is the meaning of this?!" Professor Anton broadcasted towards the mechs on an open channel. "Why have you intruded into this base and interrupted a vital and delicate experiment?!"

One of the mechs began to project the body of a familiar-looking mech designer.

"Anton." Master Rexen greeted as he looked around the testing chamber. "Do you have any idea of what you have done?"

"I completed my research project." The Senior claimed as he waved his hand at the nearby data panels. "Look at these readings! I succeeded, Master. The improved expert mech that I have built is already performing 8 percent better than normal."

Master Rexen grew angry. "YOU FOOL! The performance gains that you have made is not related to the purported enhancements that you have made to the expert mech. They are solely derived from the placebo effect. Venerable Stixson, the expert pilot who you managed to deceive and fool into conducting this heinous experiment, thinks his expert mech has become stronger, therefore he resonates better with it than usual. That is why only the parameters that are most closely related to resonance have improved. If you look more closely at all of the precious data of yours, then you will see that the parameters that are not as affected by the pilot have remained virtually unchanged!"

Anton's eyes grew wide as he made the same conclusion as Master Rexen. Compared to his initial explanation, the one provided by his former mentor and superior was much more logical!

"I...I... Why... are you here?" The Senior asked as he grew increasingly more lost and confused. "I thought... the mechers..."

"Did you think this secret research base was built by the MTA?"

"I... Director Trindael said..."

"You were fooled." Master Rexen flatly stated. "This base and its people, who conveniently disappeared before we could apprehend them by the way, has nothing to do with the mechers. Do you know who is truly responsible for constructing this base and deceiving you into working on your forbidden research project under their noses?"

"Who..."

"The members of the Gauge Dynasty."

"What?!"

"It is true. Our intelligence services have determined that the ones responsible for turning you into a war criminal and spurring you to slay one of our most honored expert pilots are nothing but agents of a rival coalition partner!"

"What is worse is that a portion of your deeds have leaked onto the galactic net!"

If Professor Anton hadn't taken enough hits already, the revelations that his controversial actions spilled into the public eye was devastating!

His world broke entirely at that point. He dropped to his knees as he lost the strength to keep himself up. "No... this can't be... I was convinced it was all true... it had to be the mechers... maybe... maybe they bailed out on me and cast the blame on the Gaugers in order to preserve their reputation! That has to be the case! Master Rexen, you should readily be able to confirm this! Just study this base and all of these advanced facilities! There should be teleporters and first-class alloys and—"

"We noticed that just before our mechs punched through them as if they were made out of paper. They are all illusions. They are ultra realistic physical projections that present a false reality. You have been lied to, Anton. You have been lied to all this time."

For a moment, utter silence reigned as Professor Anton's mind blanked out. It was as if his brain had become stuck due to the rapid influx of all of the conflicting and shocking input.

The Senior slowly raised his helmeted head and gazed towards his precious skull mech.

The thought that everything that he had done was ultimately in vain and that his expert mech hadn't grown any stronger due to the honorable sacrifice of a retired expert pilot became too much for him to bear.

As total and utter desolation descended upon his fragile mind, he did the only thing he could at this point.

He laughed.

"Hehehehe... hehehehe... hahahahaha... hahahahaha... HAHAHAHHAHA!  
HAHAHAHAHA!"

## Chapter 4123 Damage Control

Truth and lies tangled together in a web that pushed Professor Anton Mendoza into an untenable position.

When his former mentor and superior tore out the veil that had been clouding Anton's vision for the entire time, the latter did not know what to believe anymore.

Did the Gauge Dynasty truly set up an elaborate scheme to entrap him and ruin his career for the sole purpose of tarnishing the Vermeer Group?

Was the MTA truly not involved in this entire sordid affair, or had it actually used its considerable resources to fool the Fridaymen into blaming themselves?

Was Director Trinsael actually a real mecher who was tasked with conducting secret research, or was he a fictional personality who did not show up in any records?

Professor Anton simply couldn't judge what was going on anymore. He realized that he never knew the truth in the first place.

"Hahaha... I was so stupid and naive... hahahaha..."

A normal Senior Mech Designer was incredibly smart and observant. It shouldn't have been so easy to fool a person who made a living by spotting and solving countless complex engineering problems.

However, every mech designer was only proficient in a number of fields of engineering.

A rather sheltered mech designer who had only ever accrued experience by working in one design institution after another without interacting too much with outsiders was not that proficient in social engineering.

What compounded Professor Anton's naivety was that he had recently become obsessed with his radical design methods and solutions. He became so tunnel-visioned on finding a means to revolutionize his design philosophy and bring it one step closer to realization that he did not bother to question his assumptions anymore!

"I became just as single-minded as expert pilots," he reflected on himself. "I made so many mistakes and oversights that I deserved to get hoodwinked."

He did not question the shady location and providence of the secret base.

He did not question the identity or the many dubious claims made by Director Trinsael.

He did not bother to gain a second opinion or share his burden with anyone who was equipped to verify the truth.

He did not bother to think why the MTA would want to support his research in particular instead of leaving it up to their own people.

He did not question why the MTA was completely fine with his proposal to kill an expert pilot just to use the old soldier's bones as a raw material for an expert mech.

There were so many doubtful instances that alarm bells should have rung in Anton's mind a long time ago.

It was a pity that his insistence on finding a breakthrough had blinded him to the point where he only saw the roses and not the decaying bodies that fertilized the beautiful flowers.

The power of obsession could turn even the smartest mech designer into a gullible fool!

"It is over, Anton." The large projection of Master Rexen said. "The agents of the Gauge Dynasty did not only leak your attempt to murder an expert pilot in order to conduct an insane experiment related to an expert mech, but they also blamed you for the deaths of thousands of other people."

"What?!" Anton briefly shook himself out of his spiral of descent. "That is not true! I admit that I have compelled Venerable Zoman to sacrifice his life for the greater good of the Blue Cavalry, but I would never have been so depraved to slaughter thousands in order to further my own research. The mech industry would have never tolerated my actions if that was the case!"

Master Rexen stared at the suited Senior who was kneeling in despair at the moment.

"For what it is worth, I believe you. I know you well enough that you do not have the heart to go that far. However, it is difficult to refute the lies espoused by the Gaugers. Look at this, Anton."

A new projection appeared that displayed a literal mountain of bones and rotting flesh!

Skulls piled up like pyramids while other bones were strewn about as if they were dumped into the place without any thought.

The piles of shredded and decomposing flesh looked even worse. It was as if hundreds if not thousands of people had literally been torn apart in order to pick out the choicest pieces of meat.

What shocked Professor Anton as well as Venerable Stixson so much was the lack of humanity depicted in the projected view.

The way that the perpetrator callously killed and used the bodily remains of innocent victims stood in stark contrast to how Professor Anton displayed utter respect towards Venerable Zoman's own biological remains!

"That... is not mine... I am not responsible for these murders..."

"I believe you, Anton, but do you know where we found these bodies?"

"Where..?"

"700 meters away from your current position." Master Rexen answered. "For many months, you were working and conducting your research in the same asteroid base that also served as a human abattoir. Whether you were responsible for these atrocities or not, it is a fact that local citizens from this star system and neighboring star systems have been kidnapped before subsequently slain on this site. Due to the agitation of the agents of the Gauge Dynasty, the public and the relatives of the deceased will not be able to accept any other explanation than what is already spread in public."

"And what explanation is that, Master?"

"The prevailing story is that the victims, your victims, have lost their lives due to an unhinged Senior's irrational quest to empower mechs through the power of human sacrifice."

Professor Anton lowered his head. He could deny all he wanted, but with how extensively 'Director Trinsael' or the actual mastermind pushed him into this pit, there was probably no way for him to profess his innocence.

Not that it mattered!

The fact that he had guilt-tripped an expert pilot into voluntary death was true and undeniable!

This crime alone was enough to push him into eternal damnation!

The Blue Cavalry could never tolerate such a heinous event even if Anton's research succeeded in bearing fruit.

This was because its expert pilots and their many adherents in the service would revolt if they were ever expected to sacrifice their lives just to make an expert mech a little more powerful.

Although the expert pilots in the service of the Blue Cavalry were quite loyal to the Vermeer Group, there were some lines that simply shouldn't be crossed.



Professor Anton should have realized this as well, and he would have if he was in a more sober mood during the past few years.

It was a pity that his obsession had clouded even that bit of common sense!

"Whether this is a trap or not is immaterial at this point." Master Rexen spoke. "At this point, we must satisfy the victims and provide an acceptable explanation to the public. As the chief culprit of this tragedy, your head must serve as that explanation. Professor Anton Mendoza, will you surrender into the Blue Cavalry's custody and cooperate with our investigators? While we cannot undo the damage, we can make sure we learn as much from this incident as we can. The more you can assist in our inquiry, the more you can prevent future mech designers from falling into the same trap."

Anton's heart had sunk until it had almost turned black.

However, there was enough duty and loyalty left inside of him that he was willing to do this much to help the Vermeer Group. He knew it wasn't nearly enough to atone for his crimes and acts of negligence, but it was the only way he could still go forward while retaining the last remaining shreds of his honor.

As he began to raise his head and speak up, another party suddenly stopped him from giving his answer.

"NO! STOP!" The modified expert mech suddenly moved to put its frame between the observation room and the Blue Cavalry mechs! "Professor Anton is innocent! He doesn't deserve to be treated like this. All he ever wanted to do was help!"

Master Rexen's projection shook a bit. "General Abershen-Blake has already ordered you to stand down and await detention, Venerable Stixson. "

"I will not stand by and let a good friend and an innocent mech designer bear the blame for someone else's crimes!" The expert pilot insisted! "Venerable Zoman did not give his life to us in vain. Professor Anton's work truly succeeded! I can feel it! He is innocent!"

The air suddenly grew tense as the skull mech began to resonate at an increasing intensity.

Professor Anton looked up in alarm. "Venerable Stixson..."

"I know you're right, Anton! Maybe your attempt hasn't worked out as well as we hoped this time, but I am sure you can vindicate Venerable Zoman's trust in your work! We just have to keep working in order to complete your current project!"

This did not sit well with Master Rexen and the Blue Cavalry. As the Master was about to issue a sterner warning, Venerable Stixson was no longer willing to wait for the opposition to call in further reinforcements.

Expert pilots were decisive people.

Once they made a decision, they often acted upon it without entertaining any second thoughts.

They were also quite good at reading other people's intentions. When Venerable Stixson saw that Master Rexen was determined to put a total end to this entire affair in one way or another, the young and impulsive expert pilot could not hold himself back any longer!

"Follow me, professor! I will carve a way out for you!" He roared even as his expert mech exploded into action!

The skull mech raised its rifle and began to fire a rapid sequence of resonance-empowered positron beams at the Blue Cavalry mechs within its line of sight!

Mech after mech collapsed onto the floor as the powerful positron beams seared straight through their armor and inflicted crippling damage onto their internals!

The regular mechs had no chance against a genuine expert mech! Not under these circumstances and with so few numbers

"Stop, Venerable Stixson! You are committing treason!" Master Rexen yelled just before his projection cut away.

It was a pity that Venerable Stixson remained unmoved to these pleas.

"I will not allow any further injustice to take place under my nose!"

The expert pilot followed his own heart and conviction and proceeded to fight for a way out of the secret base.

Under Stixson frantic urging, Anton bewilderingly entered the skull mech's cockpit.

There, he watched on as the rogue expert mech proceeded to shoot down any opposing mech and scare away any groups of infantry that sought to stop the escape of the chief suspect.

Stixson tried his best not to kill any Fridaymen in his escape attempt. All of the damage he inflicted onto the opposing mechs merely disabled their systems without ever placing their cockpits at risk.

Without any expert mechs or overwhelming numbers on their side, the Blue Cavalry units simply found it impossible to stop Venerable Stixson from doing what he wanted.

Eventually, the rogue expert pilot and the fugitive Senior managed to make their escape.

That journey was one of the most chaotic periods of Anton's life. He could not even explain how he was able to outrun his pursuers and evade capture for so long.

All he knew was that he could never return to the Friday Coalition for the rest of his life.

Anton spoke to Master Rexen one last time over the comm. It was when he had just crossed the border of civilized space and became secure in the fact that his pursuers were unlikely to catch up at this point.

"Master..."

"You shouldn't have called me, Anton." Rexen sighed. "Now I will be put under another round of investigation. Do you know how much your escape has exacerbated this debacle?"

"I am sorry, Master."

"Don't apologize anymore. You have made your way into lawless space. The rules of survival are much different over there. If you want to stay alive, then you must adapt to a more brutal game. Never show weakness. Project strength in any way you can. The infamy that you have built up will serve you well in that. Play into the madness that has led the public to believe you have ruthlessly cut down thousands of people in your quest to design a better mech. Let the pirates of the frontier know that Reno Jimenez, otherwise known as the Skull Architect, is the most murderous mech designer in their midst."

"What?" Anton looked astonished. "My name is not—"

"It is now." Master Rexen insisted. "The spooks of the Gauge Dynasty may have successfully provoked a scandal that has inflicted significant damage to our Vermeer Group social cohesion, but we have done our best to limit the damage. We could not afford to drag in the Blue Cavalry and our expert pilots into this cesspit. We especially could not afford to tarnish the reputation of your alma mater. No matter what, the dignity of Marten Hildebrand and its backers must remain spotless. Hence the reason why the culprit of the brutal murders is Professor Reno Jimenez, a failing mech designer who originated from an average mech design university, have I made myself clear?"

"Yes... sir..."

"Good man. For what it is worth, I wish I would have intervened sooner. I should not have denied you so often. I at least needed to keep a closer eye on you when you started showing deviating behavior. If I did, I could have guided you to a healthier course of action."

The fugitive mech designer became emotional to the point where he began to tear up. "I would have liked that as well..."

This was the last time that the Skull Architect used his original name.

Professor Anton Mendoza became a forgotten person in the Vermeer Group.

Though not all of his traces could be scrubbed, the government did its best to minimize any mention of him. The name disappeared on many databases and many people who knew him personally received strict orders to never talk about Anton Mendoza again.

Since the condemned mech designer largely spent his time in a closed circle and had very few interactions with other parties, it was easy for the Vermeer Group to make the alumni from Marten Hildebrand disappear.

In time, the scandal itself became forgotten as time and other events began to dominate people's attention.

The few people that were still obsessed over the incident finally let go once the Komodo War commenced in earnest.

Compared to a tragedy that affected a couple of thousands lives at most, a war that directly affected the lives of trillions of Fridaymen and Hexers and decided the future of even more people was much more significant!

The Skull Architect never forgot, though. The traumas he experienced from this life-changing sequence of events haunted him up until this day.

#### Chapter 4124 Long Years

The attempt to impart an expert mech with extraordinary properties had been the downfall of Professor Anton Mendoza's career.

Even as he moved on under several different guises, the earnest mech designer from the Vermeer Group was never able to let go of his original research project.

It was the mental scar that tortured his mind whenever his thoughts turned to an attempt to realize his design philosophy and advance to Master.

Perhaps it functioned as a mental block that sabotaged any effort he made to move past the bottleneck that was the source of his frustration and his drastic change in circumstances.

It did not seem to matter what identity he used and what badge he put on his output.

Professor Anton Mendoza who patriotically worked on behalf of the Blue Cavalry failed to achieve a breakthrough.

Professor Reno Jimenez who quickly inspired dread and fear as the infamous Skull Architect failed to achieve a breakthrough.

Now in his third guise, Professor Benedict Cortez who had become the second leader of the rising Cross Clan was determined to break the pattern!

Mere instances after Ves' Hammer of Brilliance struck the Senior Mech Designer's head, Professor Benedict experienced the greatest sense of enlightenment that he had ever experienced in almost 150 years of life!

As Anton Mendoza, he accumulated a lot of knowledge and gained a lot of experience with working on many different military-grade mechs.

He also learned a lot by holding regular exchanges and receiving many helpful lessons from the expansive community of Vermeer Group mech designers.

As the Skull Architect, he became a lot more radical in his conduct and his research experiments.

The incompetent pirates that botched everything he asked of them and the awful logistical circumstances that hindered him from gaining the resources he needed were but a few of the reasons why he became so unscrupulous towards his work.

The constant frustrations and setbacks had encouraged him to resort to increasingly more extreme and desperate methods in order to make any progress!

Though most of the research projects he conducted during the decades he spent in the Faris Star Region had failed for one reason or another, that did not mean he learned nothing throughout the process.

Much of what he learned during this chaotic and dangerous period of his life were derived from empirical data generated by practical experimentation.

This actually served to fill up a gap that he had neglected for a long time.

The Skull Architect gained a better feel and understanding for mechs. He also became more knowledgeable about what worked and what definitely did not work.

It was a pity that he had never come close to a viable solution to the critical problem that prevented his most important research project from succeeding.

Even though he obtained many different skulls and integrated them into mechs in various different ways, none of them had ever produced any results that were at least similar to the ones he obtained when he created his first 'skull mech'.

That did not deter him, though. He continued to soldier on and persisted on his research, hoping that his accumulation combined with a successful experiment might prove to be enough for him to break past his bottleneck eventually.

At the present day, Professor Benedict Cortez only possessed faint hope that the Mars Project would actually be able to give him the spark that he had been looking for in the second half of his life.

Although he spoke a little optimistically about his chances to the others, he knew quite well that relying on the Magma Vein System alone was not enough for him to realize his design philosophy.

The Magma Vein System was at best a system that optimized the use of energy and the way it was transmitted to different parts of mechs.

There was nothing overly special or extraordinary about it. Reaching a few percentage points closer to 100 percent efficiency was still within the realm of conventional technology. The biggest requirement was the use of quality materials that produced less waste than cheaper materials.

What little ingenuity he put into the Magma Vein System might make it difficult for other mech designers to imitate his work, but it was not adequate enough to serve as the basis of a breakthrough technology.

Secretly, he had always kept his original research project in his mind, even up to this day. He had put too much blood, sweat and tears in it to give up on his original idea.

While he recognized that he had become affected by the sunk cost fallacy, he could not bring himself to step away from the research that had caused him to become a fugitive and lose almost everything he worked for in the first half of his life.

Unfortunately, wanting something to happen was not enough to make it come true. Failed result after failed result continued to pile up while successes were few and far in between.

It was only after he came into contact with Ves Larkinson that he began to see renewed hope in achieving further progress.

Much to his amazement, the X-Factor that the Skull Architect painstakingly sought to impart in his mechs had become standard issue to the products developed by this young but talented mech designer.

His daring and his unorthodox approach to mech design reminded him a lot of Carmin Olson, who had since advanced to Master, just as she boasted in front of him all of those decades ago.

While Ves Larkinson's design philosophy and its applications were only tangibly related to his own ambitious goal, the Skull Architect nonetheless believed that he could leverage the younger mech designer's expertise to his own advantage.

What the man's wife managed to accomplish recently further vindicated his belief. Gloriana Wodin had worked much more extensively with Ves and got rewarded by it by developing her new god body concept, a method that could potentially empower and increase the quality of an expert mech by directly leveraging metaphysical input!

It was Gloriana's innovative solution that most recently occupied Professor Benedict's mind when he thought about his old research project.

He was not jealous of her and did not think her method was encroaching upon his own. The main crux of Gloriana's god body was that it was entirely dependent on external sources of energy to further the evolution of a mech.

That was not quite what Professor Benedict had in mind.

Despite all of the differences between his own ideas and that of the younger Larkinson mech designer, the exposure to different works continually inspired him and prompted him to revisit his old problems from a new angle.

This process had been taking place for several years now as he continually became confronted by one new innovative design application after another from the Larkinsons.

He just never found a way to tie it all together and produce a work that successfully applied what he learned in a new and innovative fashion.

Until now.

He had worked as a mech designer for over a century. Everything he learned and everything he became exposed to had continually piled up in his mind.

Some of what he absorbed had turned into useful knowledge while many other materials turned dormant as Professor Benedict never found a good use for them after all this time.

Yet now that a powerful external force known as Vulcan descended into his mind with his consent, a different perspective that was filled with a lot of foreign knowledge, much of which he never learned, began to sort through his knowledge accumulation.

This was the first time that Vulcan fully gained access to the mind of a formidable Senior Mech Designer.

Previously, the design spirit only descended upon the minds of artisans who did not have anything to do with mechs or Journeymen who were on the same level as Ves.

Professor Benedict possessed far more depth and insights on mechs than any of those people!

Though Vulcan had to spend a lot more time and struggled increasingly to understand the more advanced and abstruse knowledge that Professor Benedict had mastered, the vast exposure already produced certain results!

Vulcan's second perspective allowed him to tie unrelated pieces of knowledge together that previously did not appear to be related to each other.

This took place on a large scale as Professor Benedict directly benefited from the formidable intellect and wisdom of a design spirit who professed to be the God of Mechs among other domains.

Not only that, but Vulcan also lent a tiny portion of his own considerable expertise to Professor Benedict, giving him the keys that had prevented him from forming many useful realizations throughout the years.

As a result, Professor Benedict became flooded with insights, many of which were rather small and limited in scale, but a few of them were far more significant than usual.

Due to all of this mental activity, the so-called false inspired state that the Hammer of Brilliance was meant to induce on people quickly turned into a greater phenomenon!

Ves took a step back in astonishment as he could feel from Professor Benedict's body as well as his connection through the design network and Vulcan that the effect he produced was far greater than he anticipated!

"This..."

The value that Vulcan could bring to people differed by how much data, information and knowledge that they had gathered over the years.

To relatively young Journeymen like Ves and his fellow Larkinson mech designers, the benefits were relatively useful but fairly limited.

After all, they had only worked as professional mech designers for a decade at most. What they learned before that point was merely basic scientific knowledge that could hardly form the basis of any meaningful breakthroughs.



A Senior as old and experienced as Professor Benedict was substantially different!

He had lived almost four times as long as Ves, and spent a much greater proportion of his life pushing the limits of known science!

He accumulated a dreadful amount of advanced and experimental data and knowledge. Though only a fraction of it was truly useful and relevant to his attempt to progress his design philosophy further, Vulcan helped the Senior make countless new and useful associations in a short amount of time!

In fact, Professor Benedict's mind would have overheated by now if not for the fact that Vulcan was helping him process all of these new connections!

Soon enough, Professor Benedict's inspiration began to expand even further. Ves and the other Larkinson mech designers found to their surprise that the Senior was actually beginning to draw from portions of their expertise as well!

The additional knowledge that mech designers who approached mechs from radically different directions enriched Benedict even further to the point where he could finally summon up the courage to present a real solution to his problem!

"So it was like this all along... mechs... possess so many more possibilities than I thought."

True inspiration struck Professor Benedict as he rapidly formed a new design solution that he was determined to apply to the Mars Project despite the fact that it was not a part of the original design!

He turned towards the Larkinson mech designers with burning eyes. "Let us elevate the Mars to a new height!"

Professor Benedict had become so determined all of a sudden that Ves and the others didn't have the will or desire to resist.

The older mech designer then proceeded to turn to Patriarch Reginald Cross.

"I will need your cooperation as well."

"You will have it, professor." The leader of the Cross Clan replied.

Since Patriarch Reginald was connected to the design network as well, he could clearly learn that Professor Benedict had bold ideas in mind.

Though the expert pilot did not possess the expertise to judge whether Benedict's spontaneous new plan was any good, Reginald had a good feeling about what was about to occur.

Soon enough, Professor Benedict forcefully took charge of the fabrication effort and proceeded to inject his supercharged energy into the work process!

## Chapter 4125 Made

Professor Benedict Cortez had long put a lot of hopes on the Mars Project.

Every expert mech design project was of great significance to him. The ones he worked on in the first half of his life had given him his first exposure to the possibilities that expert pilots as well as resonating exotics introduced.

Though he hadn't been able to work on any further expert mechs when he was exiled beyond the reaches of civilized space, he always had them in his mind.

Now that he had become the head designer of the Cross Clan, he finally regained the chance to work on expert mech design projects once again.

His first actual work on them was when he assisted the Larkinsons in developing their new expert mechs such as the C-Man and the Blade Chaser Mark II.

As much as he enjoyed the opportunity to work on those expert mechs, they were ultimately the works of the Larkinson mech designers. His own contributions were limited to a few areas that the Journeymen could not accomplish due to their lack of exposure to the greater secrets of expert mechs.

It was only when he was allowed to lead the Mars Project that he could truly impart his vision in a powerful expert mech design!

He took full advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to put his stamp onto the Mars design.

While people such as Ves and Gloriana added their own unique touches to the Mars Project, their influence was relatively limited.

No matter what, Professor Benedict Cortez held a firm grip on the regime and the direction of the Mars design. This was the most powerful mech he had worked at this point in his turbulent career and it might very well be the best opportunity for him to achieve a substantive breakthrough in his design philosophy.

While those hopes remained rather faint in the past, it was different now that he literally became struck by inspiration.

As his mind and spirit became completely energized, he looked at his design and his work in a much more comprehending perspective than before.

The fog that had obscured his work and theories for so long had become unable to block his vision any further!

"The original design needs to change. Follow my lead and assist me as best possible." Professor Benedict instructed the Larkinson mech designers.

Through the power of Alexandria's active design network, Ves, Gloriana, Juliet and Sara thoroughly understood what the Senior needed from them. Doubts and misunderstandings were few and far in between as the instant sharing of ideas at a much greater fidelity than could be accomplished through other forms of communication prevailed over the course of their cooperation.

Hours passed by as the mech designers all operated the various machines and fabricated the parts that they were originally tasked with producing.

The only differences so far was that Professor Benedict slightly altered the design or specifications of a few of those parts on the spot.

For what purpose, neither Ves nor any of the other Journeymen exactly knew. This was because Professor Benedict did not expose his full theories and intentions to them, not because the Senior was possessive of his ideas, but because they were too profound and advanced for the Larkinsons to understand at their stage.

This way, Ves and the others were able to perform their work with greater direction but not to the point where they became distracted and overwhelmed by Professor Benedict's brand-new ideas and solutions.

As the mech designers all kept churning out part after part, the leader of the fabrication run operated the Cross Clan's first-class superfab in a careful and controlled manner.

His responsibility had always been the greatest in the original fabrication plan, but with the new changes that he intended to introduce, he played an even greater role than before.

He knew quite well that it was taboo in his profession to spontaneously alter major aspects of a mech design in the process of fabricating a copy, but he couldn't help himself this time.

Just like all of those years ago when he was obsessed with making his initial skull mech work, Professor Benedict had completely fallen back into his bad habits and became struck by a case of tunnel vision once again.

The difference this time was that he was much more knowledgeable and confident than before!

Whereas in the past he was driven to obsession by overly-optimistic assumptions and spurious proof, this time he possessed a much more solid theoretical base!

With Vulcan's active assistance and insights, Professor Benedict had become completely enlightened in a way that had eluded him in the past.

It was this abundance of knowledge and understanding that confidently spurred him into making one modification after another.

As he did so, he generated so much enthusiasm and anticipation that his overflowing optimism infected the other mech designers in the design network.

The Larkinson mech designers all performed a bit better as well as their morale rose and began to share some of Professor Benedict's hopes and dreams!

Even as Gloriana and the other mech designers took their scheduled breaks at times, Professor Benedict did not stop at all. He was on a roll and he did not want to lose his momentum and miss the inspiration that was affecting and empowering his entire mood at the moment.

Day and night, he worked to diligently fabricate the parts needed to assemble the Mars while at the same time applying new and more refined design solutions to the current design.

It was one of the most productive and most enjoyable times he had ever experienced in his life!

It was during these crucial hours and days that he fully reconnected to his original love and passion for mechs!

He not only recalled his old regrets, but also harkened back to his forgotten dreams and the many projects that he had abandoned over the course of his career.

He reflected on those failures and missed opportunities, all the while putting enough concentration in his actual work to maintain his schedule.

Though his journey as a mech designer was far from smooth and could never be compared to the relatively straightforward trajectory of Master Carmin Olson, Professor Benedict was still proud of his work.

Both his good results and bad results had shaped him and his design philosophy until he was the man he was today.

He had matured enormously over the years and the time he spent in completely different environments had not only broadened his perspective, but rapidly raised his adaptability, thereby ultimately turning him into a more resilient mech designer.

All of the good mechs and bad mechs he had encountered over the course of his life provided further inspiration and guidance to him. The ones developed by Ves and the Larkinson Clan especially stood out due to how they pursued completely different tangents to empower the machines even further.

He also recalled his recent works. The mechs he designed for the Cross Clan in the past few years were not that exciting, but that was not their purpose.

His mechs were all designed along the same way he developed mechs for the Blue Cavalry in the past.

Since the Cross Clan was highly militaristic, his products fit well with his new clients. The Crossers did not have any unusual needs and were more than happy to pilot robust, military-grade mechs that could fight for longer periods of time and did not get exhausted too soon.

Yet... as efficient and reliable as his contemporary designs may seem, their energy efficiency rates were still a bit more limited than he would have liked.

The amount of energy put into their reserves did not equal the amount of energy they translated into useful results.

Actions such as moving a mech forward or firing an energy weapon caused the machine to lose a significant amount of energy in every step of the way. That lost energy mostly turned into heat that subsequently went to waste.

It had always been his dream to achieve 100 percent efficiency. If that was not possible, then he was more than willing to settle with 95 or 90 percent efficiency.

Unfortunately, those were dream numbers as far as the rest of the mech industry was concerned.

There were times where Professor Benedict felt tempted to give up on his original ambition. It was impossible to achieve these insane levels of efficiency unless he designed a mech that was only good in this aspect using the most expensive technologies and materials available to humanity.

Yet after thinking about how many sacrifices had been made for him to attain this progress, he could not bear the thought of abandoning his original intentions.

Now, as he and his other fellow mech designers completed the first major phase of the fabrication run, he was ready to put his incredible new design solution to the test!

"Let us prepare to assemble the mech." He spoke.

The mech designers first inspected the parts that they had just produced. Each of them were quite exquisite. None of them exhibited any obvious deviations or flaws that could tarnish the completed work.

This allowed them to proceed with the assembly without any further delays. The mech designers largely followed the original plan as they each focused on building up the mech while handling the parts they produced themselves as much as possible.

Professor Benedict again played a huge role in this as much of the core and guts of the mechs were made by him. He placed each of these parts into the frame with purpose.

The closer the Mars came to completion, the closer he came to completing his ambitious new plan.

What was special this time was that he also asked Patriarch Reginald Cross to assist more actively in the assembly of his imminent expert mech.

"What can I do, Benedict?" The expert pilot curiously asked.

"I need you to stand close to the expert mech and resonate with it." Benedict requested.

"...You do know that the Mars isn't complete, right? How can I interface with it when it can't even power up at this time?"

"That is the thing, Reginald. You don't have to. You're a high-tier expert pilot. You should be able to establish a connection and prime your expert mech without needing to interface it in a conventional manner. The Mars is already designed to resonate with you in mind. It will respond to you even if it is in an incomplete state.

"Will that... create disruptions to the assembly process?" Patriarch Reginald asked with concern.

"No. It may produce changes, but that is exactly what I am trying to accomplish. We will do our best to adapt to the circumstances. Please proceed, Reginald."

The expert pilot reluctantly did as he was asked and began to 'prime' his mech with the ascribed method.

Surprisingly enough, Reginald was actually able to form a rudimentary form of resonance with the Mars even though it was only half-complete at this stage!

Although it was a major hazard to bring an expert pilot so close to a machine that was being actively constructed, Professor Benedict was determined to complete the Mars while it was constantly resonating with Patriarch Reginald in advance!

The Larkinson mech designers were completely clueless what this extra step was supposed to accomplish.

Even Ves who knew the most about spiritual engineering wasn't entirely clear what was going on either.

Fortunately, it did not take too long to complete the highly anticipated fabrication process. As almost every part was put into place, it became clear that one of Professor Benedict's modifications had purposefully left a conspicuous gap in the interior of the expert mech.

Professor Benedict left open the chest of the mech so that he could add a special component to the Mars that had not been present in the original design.

He had to ask an assistant to retrieve the special part from one of his personal storage vaults in advance.

When he finally picked up the metal lockbox that he had stashed to the side, he opened it up and retrieved the key that he had long preserved in the event he saw a chance to fulfill his dream.

He carefully reached out with arms and reverently picked up a clean and well-preserved skull.

Ves, who had been watching from the side, became shocked by its appearance!

"That skull...!"

Even from a distance, he could feel the strength and will that still clung to the macabre object!

"Hello Stixson, my old friend." Professor Benedict emotionally whispered. "I've come to talk to you again."

The powerful willpower that constantly radiated from the human skull seemed to respond to Benedict, though that might be an illusion.

Nevertheless, the skull was the key to realizing the vision that Benedict had planted in his brain a long time ago! After more than half a century of wandering through restless dreams by himself, he had finally reached the light that was at the end of the tunnel.

Professor Benedict began to float above the workshop floor while holding the skull of his old friend.

He flew to the open cavity within the chest of the mech and entered inside it without any incident.

Everyone else fell silent as Professor Benedict made his move.

When the Senior reached the surface of the power reactor, he devotedly affixed the human skull into place. He adjusted several parts so that his latest addition was well-protected.

Once he retreated and lowered himself to the floor, he proceeded to finalize the Mars by himself.

As soon as he put the final piece into place, the completed Mars began to glow and transform before their very own eyes!

Numerous different interactions took place at once!

Not only had the Mars activated its god body, but it was also undergoing a more profound transformation!

"Masterwork!" Gloriana enthusiastically called. "Professor Benedict did it! He did it! The Mars... has become a masterwork!"

In fact, the Mars was more than just a masterwork. Everything that Benedict and everyone else put into the expert mech design was of such great magnitude that it had shot far beyond the threshold of a masterwork mech!

Its quality climbed up well into the second rung of the craftsmanship ladder, making it even more powerful and exquisite than before!

At the same time, Patriarch Reginald had never stopped with his current activity. He continually touched the side of the leg of his new expert mech and actively resonated with the dormant machine, causing it to gain an increasingly brighter glow!

Professor Benedict became so awash with emotions that he finally could not maintain his control any longer.

A tear leaked from his eye as his knees lost strength.

He knelt as if he was bowing and praying in tribute to the glowing god that he had made.

"Mars..." He whispered in the workshop hall that had descended into utter silence.

No one spoke for minutes even as the Mars transformed into an unprecedented mech.

Chapter 4126 A New Bridge

To Ves, what unfolded before his eyes was unprecedented.



It was not strange for him to see a mech exceed the masterwork threshold these days.

However, this time was special.

Ves and the rest of his fellow Larkinsons weren't responsible for this feat this time. Though they had put more effort into this design than many of their other mechs, they never considered it to be theirs alone.

Despite turning into a living mech that contained all of the strongest elements of their respective design philosophies, the Mars did not belong to the Larkinson Clan.

It was designed to become the new flagship mech of the Cross Clan.

Now that Ves and everyone else present in the workshop of the Primary Cross Lab could see the expert mech in its final and complete form, they truly felt it had become a fantastic representative of a clan that was on the rise.

The mech exuded power and might beyond any expert mech that Ves had seen in person. Not even the Gatecrasher, which Ves previously considered as the most impressive high-tier expert mech that he had witnessed in action, could compare against an extravagant machine that could rightfully be called a half-step ace mech!

As the lengthy and extensive masterwork transformation continued to change and alter the frame of the Mars for the better, Ves and the others became completely enthralled by the improvements that emerged.

New insights and realizations spawned in their minds that had never graced them before.

Part of this was because the Mars was such a complex, powerful and high-end expert mech. Not even the C-Man with its TESMAS could come close to the technological sophistication of the expert hybrid mech.

The collision and interplay with all kinds of brand-new products of high technology such as the Abasis Armor, the Pulsvar V-1, the ARCEUS System and so on generated an enormous amount of technical realizations that the mech designers simply couldn't catch them all with their limited processing capacity.

They could only record the transformations with their implants and the workshop's excellent sensors and repeatedly review the footage at a later date to grasp the insights that eluded during this time.

Even then, they were destined not to comprehend everything that took place within the Mars as much of the advanced systems were outside of their areas of expertise.

For example, while Ves was able to understand the intricacies concerning the ARCEUS System fairly well considering that he had worked on it for more than a year straight, he understood almost nothing about what was going on with the highly-prized Abasis Armor!

It was okay, though. Ves did not have any desire to bite more than he could chew. The huge amount of insights he derived from the ARCEUS System already enhanced his overall understanding of energy weapon systems by a large margin!

However, that wasn't the most interesting part about the transformation of the Mars.

What truly captured his imagination was how Professor Benedict's extraordinary efforts affected the spiritual design of the Mars.

While Ves did not fully understand what the Senior had done with the skull of an expert pilot, it appeared that integrating it into the power reactor of the expert mech produced an extraordinary series of reactions that produced a remarkable new addition to the machine.

Through his spiritual senses, he could see that the skull had become much more than just a hidden ornament. Through the special design elements that Professor Benedict had spontaneously added to the mech design in an act of inspiration, the skull had actually turned into a bridge between the material and the imaginary realm!

Ves had to double-check and triple-check his observations in order to verify what he was seeing.

"An actual bridge!"

The implications and the uses of such a bridge were enormous. He couldn't even begin to describe the brilliance of this mechanism and what kind of effects it could produce!

Ves could fully believe that this was an innovation that was worthy for a Senior Mech Designer to advance to Master Mech Designer.

He could hardly imagine a case where Professor Benedict's dream would be denied because this invention was insufficient!

As Ves observed the effects of the skull even further, he could see that it not only served as a bridge between different realms, but also acted as an energy converter of sorts.

The object drew loose spiritual energy from the imaginary realm and then proceeded to convert it into another, more mysterious form of energy that subsequently spread throughout the power reactor and the components that corresponded to the Magma Vein System.

Ves wasn't able to determine the exact effects of this interaction, but he could see that it was constantly taking place no matter whether the mech was dormant or active.

Though he wasn't able to make any precise judgments on these new phenomena due to how new and unprecedented they were, he could make a guess or two. He highly suspected that the Mars had become even more inexhaustible than before.

It would take a very long time before the Mars bottomed-out its energy reserves!

This had incredibly scary implications. As a powerful hybrid mech, the Mars was by nature a war machine whose firepower and impact on the battlefield scaled with the amount of energy it had at its disposal.

An expert hybrid mech that only possessed a fourth of the energy reserves of another machine would find itself much more limited in how much it could impact an ongoing battle.

Therefore, if Professor Benedict's latest innovation could directly or indirectly increase the total amount of energy that the Mars could convert into useful work by just 10 or 15 percent, the implication was that the mech would effectively perform 10 percent better in many different situations!

Against more powerful enemies, the Mars could engage its weapons and employ its defensive and mobility systems at higher power levels without worrying about running out in mid-battle.

Against weaker opponents, the Mars could liberally utilize its ARCEUS System to annihilate even greater swarms of cannon fodder.

No matter what, with more energy at its disposal, Patriarch Reginald's new expert mech would definitely become an even scarier presence on the battlefield!

"This isn't even the only implication of the new addition."

What interested Ves even more was how the existence of the bridge actually fed into the rest of the spiritual design of the Mars.

A new and maybe unintentional form of synergy had emerged inside the expert mech.

Part of the spiritual energy that the Mars drew from the imaginary realm did not convert into other forms of energy.

Instead, they channeled directly into the more spiritual elements of the Mars and everything else that was attached to it. This included facets of Gloriana's god body and Ves' structured living spiritual foundation!

To put it into more simple terms, Professor Benedict's invention directly boosted the specialties imparted by Ves and Gloriana!

Though Ves was concerned how this unanticipated change affected his own elaborate design arrangements of the Mars, he was overall quite happy with this addition.

More energy translated into greater power and development! The living aspects of the Mars would become even stronger than he initially intended, which meant that the expert mech would definitely be able to display even more extraordinary abilities in battle!

Of course, Ves still needed to verify the exact effects during the crucial testing sessions that would commence after the completion of this pivotal mech.

Though the mech designers had made extensive calculations and predictions on the performance of the Mars, its masterwork transformation as well as Professor Benedict's drastic changes largely turned all of that data obsolete.

Ves and the others had to rebuild all of their datasets from the ground up! There was no way that they could predict how the Mars actually behaved once it was finally being put to use. The only certainty that they possessed was that the expert mech was definitely a lot more powerful than before!

Soon, the masterwork transformation had run its course. The Mars seemed to settle into its new and improved state, though it was still thrumming and glowing with activity.

Part of it was because of the skull that was constantly injecting the mech with energy.

Another part of it was because Patriarch Reginald had never ceased to resonate with his new expert mech!

Despite how cumbersome it must be to resonate with an expert mech outside of a man-machine connection, Patriarch Reginald was too impressed and enthused by his new high-end machine to stop. He had already grown addicted to the Mars!

All of this had too many implications for Ves to keep track of. He particularly took note of how the expert pilot and expert mech already started to familiarize with each other in advance.

Ves turned his gaze to Professor Benedict.

The Senior had risen to his feet by now. The former Skull Architect definitely gained the most from this fabrication run. The older man was so preoccupied by all of the revelations he had obtained from his latest work of brilliance that his mind had remained in flux even though Vulcan's influence had long faded away.

Ves could not precisely tell what was going on with Professor Benedict. He cautiously stepped forward and reached the man's side.

"Are you..."

"I have yet to realize my design philosophy." Benedict whispered back as most of his concentration remained preoccupied with all of the insights that captivated his imagination. "I have come closer, though. I am closer to breaking past the bottleneck than I have ever been in the last fifty years of my life."

"That..."

"Don't look disappointed. This is a fantastic step forward for me. The first attempt is always the most difficult for mech designers such as us. Today, I have managed to implement a reality-defying innovation. If you ask me to apply the same solution to another mech or expert mech, I will be unable to oblige your request because I cannot replicate it at the moment."

"Oh."

Ves immediately grew a little disappointed. It would have been nice if Professor Benedict could help the Larkinsons upgrade their existing roster expert mechs. Who wouldn't want to add an extra power-up to their expert mechs?

Of course, Ves had yet to think about where he could obtain the necessary skulls to serve as bridges between the two realms.

"As I have said, I have already completed the first step of my breakthrough process." Professor Benedict clarified to the younger mech designer. "What I need to do in the next couple of years is to study my new innovation and deconstruct it so I can thoroughly understand how it works. Once I have done that, I can devise a systematic method that can be applied in a more universal manner, not just by myself, but also by other mech designers such as you and your wife. As long as I have accomplished these feats, I believe that my advancement to the rank of Master will not take long to come into fruition!"

"Con..congratulations, professor!"

If Professor Benedict could truly complete this profound and important leap, the Cross Clan and the Golden Skull Alliance would definitely rise to a greater level of power, wealth, prominence and importance!

More than that, Ves would gain easy access to a genuine Master Mech Designer who he maintained a close and intimate relationship with. The bond between the two went beyond mutual interests. Years of shared struggles and cooperation had turned them into comrades-in-arms as well as personal friends!

The practical value of such a bond could not be overstated. While Ves had already acquainted himself with numerous impressive mech designers such as Master Willix and Master Dervidian, neither of the two were on his side. His importance to them were purely based on interests and nothing more, which made them inherently unreliable in situations where Ves most needed their assistance.

Rather than relying for help from these aloof MTA Master who were concerned with much more different matters, Ves would rather lean on a Master Mech Designer who would not hesitate to bail him out if he had fallen into trouble!

## Chapter 4127 Energy Bridges

"I am sure you have questions." Professor Benedict spoke after a while.

Ves sure did. He had questions. A lot of questions.

Though it was probably unreasonable for him to gain answers to all of his questions, he would be happy if Benedict was able to clarify even a small part of his actions.

It was too hard for Ves to appreciate the Mars if he was unable to grasp the new additions to its design!

"What exactly did you do to empower the Mars beyond our original plan?"

"It is difficult to explain." Benedict replied. "In fact, you can essentially divide my novel contributions into two different categories. First, as you are no doubt able to observe, the skull of the expert pilot that I have integrated into the Mars has created a channel that draws metaphysical energy from... at least one other dimension."

"I call it the imaginary realm."

The Senior Mech Designer smiled. "That is as good of a name as any. I have learned of its existence many years ago, but it was only after I started to become exposed to your work that I have been able to engage with it more extensively. I have long been obsessed in learning how the skull is able to sustain its special activity and qualities without any apparent energy source. After persistent studies, I have been able to learn that an extension of it is connected to a different dimension. What I have succeeded in doing is to leverage this channel to a greater greater degree so that it actively siphons a greater rate of energy from this 'imaginary realm' than was previously the case."

It sounded fairly simple, but it was anything but easy. With Ves' background in spiritual engineering, he could follow the description easily enough, but when it came to replicating Professor Benedict's essential feat, there was no way he could imitate this implementation!

Even if Ves managed to get his hands on the skull of an expert pilot, he wouldn't know where to begin if he wanted to turn it into a spiritual energy bridge.

This was a brand new form of spiritual engineering that was based on different principles and design solutions!

Perhaps Ves would only be able to master this design solution once Professor Benedict realized his design philosophy and turned his energy bridge into a systematic method.

Ves found it quite confounding how a mech designer who largely specialized in the physical aspects of a mech had been able to come up with such a brilliant feat of spiritual engineering!

In fact, Professor Benedict only barely learned a few basic principles on spiritual engineering after getting exposed to Ves' work. What the older man had done after that was to make use of his own formidable specialty in energy systems and transmission systems to 'hack' the spiritually active skull and turn it into a brand-new energy source!

It was this 'hack' that Ves was interested in the most, but as Professor Benedict continued to elaborate about his method, it became clear that the younger of the two did not possess the required technological understanding to comprehend the essence of the new method.

"This is exactly what I need to work on." Professor Benedict remarked as he observed Ves' confusion. "Universality is an important requirement for mech designers. We are not only tasked with designing or producing mechs. We also serve an important role in facilitating the universal development of mech technology. If we only focus on inventing complicated new design solutions without making any attempt to standardize them, then our contributions will end as soon as we die or disappear from the scene. That does not constitute true progress in the mech industry."

This was one of Ves' biggest shortcomings as a mech designer. While much of his inability to transfer his methods to others was due to his insistence on retaining his competitive advantage, it did not help that many of his design solutions were based on spiritual engineering, which was inherently difficult for other people to get into due to their weak perceptions.

Ves would have a long task ahead of him once he advanced to Senior and started to plan his own journey to Master.

They talked a bit more about Professor Benedict's newly-dubbed metaphysical energy bridge. The two had plenty to talk about even if they did not stray too much into the technical details of the brilliant new hybrid tech.

"There's a big problem with your energy bridge implementation. The fact that it is based on the skull of a human expert pilot will definitely generate a lot of controversy to say the

least. If people find out that you have utilized the remains of an honored soldier for something as banal as powering up a mech, then..."

There was no way the Cross Clan would be able to maintain its standing in human society!

Professor Benedict appeared to be well aware of how problematic it could be if his actions got exposed. His expression turned heavy as he partially reflected on his past.

"You do not need to remind me, Ves. I am incredibly aware of the problems that might ensue. I would like to ask you and everyone else in the workshop to maintain silence and not divulge any word of the skull."

"You can count on our discretion."

The only people inside the workshop aside from the mech designers were the expert pilots and guards hailing from the Cross Clan. Each of them were utterly loyal and would not leak out a single word.

"What about the future?" Ves pressed. "If your energy bridge solution is inescapably reliant to the skulls of high-ranking mech pilots, I am highly skeptical the MTA will welcome you in the ranks of Masters."

The whole point of Masters was to spread and publicize their newly-developed universal design solutions to the mech industry as a whole. Yet doing so for the energy bridge in its current incarnation would definitely generate a public relations nightmare of epic proportions!

Even the most radical factions of the MTA would not want to be associated with any tech that hinted at human sacrifice! This was a taboo that went against the basic principles of human dignity.

"That is the thing, Ves. My new method does not necessarily have to be based on the skulls of expert pilots." Professor Benedict smirked. "The skull that I have previously used is a relic that I have studied and taken care of for many years. I am extremely familiar with its properties and nuances. Due to this, my chances of establishing a metaphysical energy bridge was the highest if I utilized this particular skull. I am not obliged to utilize the skulls of other expert pilots in future mechs. What I truly require are physical mediums that possess an active connection to an energy-rich dimension. Do you understand what I mean?"

Ves widened his eyes. It did not take long for him to understand Benedict's unspoken message.

"Do you mean that... any extraordinary object will do? Can you utilize totems like my hammer, for example?"



"No." Benedict shook his head. "There are requirements that are difficult to satisfy. In my estimation, skulls are by far the most effective base materials for my energy bridges. While it is likely true that the skulls of expert pilots will produce the greatest results, I believe I can formulate alternative solutions that are based on the skulls of less controversial life forms such as aliens and exobeasts. The skulls of phase whales are particularly interesting to me. I would love to obtain a shard of their massive bones."

That sounded a lot better to Ves! If Patriarch Benedict became known for utilizing the skulls of non-human life forms, then no one would care about the ethics of his new invention.

In fact, as soon as other mech designers were able to master this new enhancement method, they would probably hunt down as many spiritually active beasts and aliens as possible!

"Your clan can play a useful role in this research." Professor Benedict remarked. "I never thought highly of your clan's attempt to enter the biotech industry in the past. Now, I realize how much foresight you displayed when you chose to invest in your Larkinson Biotech Institute. I have heard that you are hosting hundreds of mutated beasts that possess remarkable abilities. If you can grant me access to their bodies, I can make great progress in converting my energy bridge technology in a more palatable form."

"You will have our full support in this matter." Ves immediately promised. "Don't expect too much from us, though. The majority of mutated beasts in our possession are rather weak and underdeveloped. We haven't done much with them so far because we are waiting for them to grow stronger. It might take a long time before they reach your standard."

"That is not a major issue. At worst, the energy bridge that I can form out of their skulls will be weaker. They should still be useful enough to upgrade your expert mechs, though it is up to you whether you wish to wait until I have developed better energy bridges."

Ves decided to leave that discussion for another time.

"Can you convert anything else aside from the skulls of different creatures into an energy bridge?"

The Senior paused in thought.

"I think it is definitely possible, Ves. The skulls of special organisms are hardly optimized for this specific job. If I can study them further and understand the mechanisms that are relevant to my energy bridges, I can theoretically develop a brand-new physical medium that is much more efficient at this task. However... I do not believe I can accomplish this

in the short term. This will be one of the many major research projects that I will have to embark upon once I have established myself as a Master Mech Designer."

This was an incredibly exciting research project. Ves became more envious of Masters for their ability to research profound possibilities that could truly push the boundaries of human technology to a significant degree!

As Ves continued to learn more about Professor Benedict's innovations, he began to grow more interested at what the skull was doing to the mech it was attached to. Why was it channeling energy to the Magma Vein System?

Professor Benedict chuckled. "That is the second major innovation that I have introduced to the Mars. My original ambition is much greater than what I have managed to accomplish here. Do you know what I was trying to accomplish?"

"Make a mech more energy efficient." Ves answered.

"That is correct, but not precise enough. Imagine a mech that utilizes 100 percent of its energy reserves into useful and effective actions such as firing a gun or flying to a specific destination. Wouldn't that be stronger than a mech that wastes at least a portion of its energy into waste energy?"

"That would definitely be a powerful mech. The cost and effort to make it perfectly efficient is too prohibitive, though, if it is even possible."

"What if I tell you that I was not just aiming for perfect efficiency? What if I tell you that I was trying to attain an even greater result than that. Have you ever dreamt of a mech that was able to achieve hyper efficiency rather than perfect efficiency?"

Ves looked shocked at the older mech designer. Trying to attain 100 percent efficiency was already impossible enough. Trying to go beyond that was so ludicrous that only the most delusional mech designers would ever think about realizing such an insane condition!

"You're talking about attaining negative entropy in a mech!"

Simply put, a mech with negative entropy essentially generated more energy than it expended as it got used.

This sounded like an extremely silly notion, but Professor Benedict treated it as a serious possibility!

"For now, I will have to settle for turning the Mars into a mech that has attained extreme efficiency. Perhaps in the future I will be able to make my ultimate dream come true and succeed in developing a mech that is hyper efficient. That might even trigger my advancement to Star Designer. You never know."

Despite how casual Benedict sounded at the moment, there was no denying that he had fully set his sights to the future!

What he had accomplished today was just the start of his new career!

#### Chapter 4128 The New Value of Skulls

All this talk about energy bridges and negative entropy was quite exhaustive. Professor Benedict did not attempt to hide any of his theories and methods, which showed that his mentality had at least partially morphed into that of a Master Mech Designer.

Though Professor Benedict couldn't say when he would be able to complete his transition to Master, it would not be long before he truly entered the upper echelon of the mech industry!

Ves had heard so much about the world inhabited by Master Mech Designers and Star Designers. They closed themselves off to anyone lower than them because their work and considerations were far too distant from the mech designers who busied themselves with much more mundane concerns.

A lot of Masters were quite tight-lipped about what exactly they were hiding from the rest of the mech industry. Though Ves was curious about learning the truth, he was not impatient enough to break the rules. He figured there was no harm in waiting until he became one himself before he became initiated in the circle of top designers.

Ves was incredibly fascinated by the few details that Professor Benedict did divulge about the life of a Master. It was evident that those who had attained this rank needed to think far beyond their own interests and that of their organizations.

"To be honest, I have the option of joining many new organizations once I have become a Master." Benedict revealed. "Few ever do, but the option is still there. If we ever grow disillusioned by our states and no longer maintain any interests in maintaining our original loyalties, we can join other gatherings that do not support a specific state or group but try to benefit humanity as a whole."

"That sounds similar to how Star Designers become detached from their original states."

"Indeed. The higher you climb, the greater your responsibilities. It is also harder for Masters and Star Designers to maintain strong attachments to the ordinary squabbles and power struggles of ordinary states and groups. These conflicts... are beneath them. After all, they have become gods in a sense. Why should they care about the mundane concerns of mortals? It is difficult to prevent these psychological changes from taking place."

Ves frowned. It would be extremely bad if Professor Benedict adopted this high-minded attitude.

"There are also those who reject or at least delay this transition." Professor Benedict smiled. "Terrans and Rubarthan mech designers are particularly attached to their states. Compared to a weak and insignificant state such as the Friday Coalition, a first-rate superstate is much more capable of steering the future direction of human civilization."

"I see. What about you? What are your intentions?"

Professor Benedict let out a contemptuous snort. "I have no desire to join the company of the most elite mech designers. They have done nothing for me. Why should I devote myself to their cause? There are mech designers who think that they have become so powerful that they consider themselves beyond impunity. That encourages them to do whatever is necessary to achieve their goals and the goals of their new association, often to the detriment of other people."

Ves could think about a couple of individuals who met this description. The Polymath and Master Dervidian come to mind. They were so above ordinary concerns that they believed that no one could take them to account anymore.

"Well, I have spoken enough about this subject. I need to invest my time in studying what I have done and ensure that the Mars is still a sound machine."

"When... will we be able to put it to the test?"

"I cannot say." Professor Benedict replied. "It will take longer than I originally thought to organize a testing session. The Davute System is far too populated to maintain the confidentiality of the Mars. We will need to relocate to a quieter star system in order to perform the necessary tests. That will take time."

Ves thought about another matter. "The MTA will doubtlessly want to witness the tests as well. I can imagine that the mechers are highly interested in a masterwork expert mech that has incorporated so many new technological advancements. They also need to give us another masterwork certificate."

Neither of the two had any illusions that the MTA was in the dark about what had taken place inside the workshop. The MTA would come calling eventually, so Professor Benedict might as well extend them invitations ahead of time.

"The MTA will doubtlessly have questions."

"Especially regarding the use of a certain skull."

"Yes. That too."

"Will you get into trouble because of that?" Ves asked in concern.

"No. It won't be a problem. I... have an arrangement with the MTA."

"Are you sure, Benedict?"

"You truly do not need to be concerned. Though I am not yet a Master, I am certain that the MTA possesses more than enough vision to recognize my current state. As I have stated earlier, Masters have certain allowances that lesser people do not have. This is the privilege of power. Besides, just like you, I have associated myself with a faction. The crowd that I have befriended will most certainly mediate any potential conflicts due to my value as a Master."

It was at this point that Ves recalled that Professor Benedict had cozied up to the Unbound Humanity Faction.

Of all of the major political divisions of the Mech Trade Association, the Unbounders were definitely among the most extreme and controversial among them. It still surprised Ves that Professor Benedict would want anything to do with these extremists.

After all, the Unbounders essentially wanted to get rid of most if not all of the taboos that the Big Two imposed on humanity!

Professor Benedict's choice of company was none of Ves' business, though. Since the older man was confident enough that the Unbounders would cover his back, then there was no cause for concern.

The mech designers eventually began to wrap up the fabrication run.

They removed the waste products and stowed away the unused materials.

They performed cursory examinations of the new expert mechs and its volatile systems to verify they remained stable and inert.

They collected the data from all of the sensors and production equipment so that they could understand the fabrication process to a greater degree.

They also took great care in moving the completed expert mech to a high-security vault that the Crossers had especially built for the Mars.

Patriarch Reginald looked extremely reluctant to part ways with the expert mech. If he had his way, he would remain attached to his new masterwork mech on a permanent basis!

"Take a break, Reginald. The Mars will not be going anywhere. It will be ready for you to pilot when we have prepared a suitable time and location for you to go loose."

The testing sessions for the Mars would be at least ten times more elaborate than the ones conducted by the Larkinson Clan as of late.

Mechs such as the C-Man were nowhere near as powerful or versatile as the Mars. The latter was truly an expert mech that was built to fight and win the toughest wars!

If the Crossers wanted to gain a good understanding of what the Mars was actually capable of, then they needed to acquire thousands of practice bots at the minimum. The new expert mech possessed so many different weapon systems that a single rotation would probably be enough to destroy a hundred machines!

After making a few appointments with Professor Benedict, Ves and the Larkinsons eventually departed from the Cross Production Complex and returned to their familiar Cat Nest.

Each of them had made a massive amount of gains today. They were far too restless to go to bed, so they headed over to the Genesis Lab and recorded as much of their thoughts and insights as possible.

They also swapped plenty of their thoughts to each other.

"I've noticed that Professor Benedict's energy bridge is actually fostering the growth of the god body." Gloriana remarked.

"Oh?" Her husband raised his eyebrow.

"It is probably unintentional. His main goal was to supply extraordinary energy to the Magma Vein System, but what is important here is that the components that make up this special energy transmission system are all marked with tiny divine markers."

"Oh. You're right. That is quite a helpful coincidence."

Gloriana looked uncertain. "Maybe, maybe not. It depends on how much energy my divine markers are able to capture. It may be that only a fraction of the energy is diverted to them. That means that the Mars will not be able to evolve its god body much faster than usual. However..."

"If Professor Benedict can install an energy bridge to an expert mech without the Magma Vein System, the machine will develop its god body a lot faster!"

That was because there was little else that could suck up all of the juice produced by the energy bridge!

This was an extremely practical way to make use of Benedict's new solutions. They could readily apply it to the latest generation of Larkinson expert mechs such as the C-Man since they already incorporated Gloriana's signature god body tech.

As for the older expert mechs... Ves would have to figure something out for them. There were bound to be other uses for the energy bridge.

It was important for Ves to note that the Mars only bore the first generation of this new tech.

While it was doubtlessly a lot more powerful than what Benedict could reproduce in the short term due to the lack of a powerful material, he would definitely be able to supply much more powerful energy bridges two or three generations in the future!

Of course, that was way too far away. For now, Ves and everyone else would have to make do with weaker energy bridges that could only provide a trickle of energy at best.

"Our clan will have to step up our efforts in cultivating more mutated beasts." Ves thoughtfully said. "Professor Benedict will definitely have to experiment with the skulls of a lot of remarkable creatures if he wants to rid himself of his dependence on the skulls of high-ranking mech pilots."

"Exobeast skulls are different from the skulls of expert pilots, correct?" Gloriana asked.

"That is correct. Expert pilots are truly special. No one else aside from swordmasters are able to amplify their willpower to such a powerful degree. That is what makes these soldiers and warriors so unique. This is also why I think the general implementation of energy bridges will ultimately be a little underwhelming."

In fact, the public version of energy bridges might not even be powerful enough to attract the interest of other mech designers.

Unless they developed special applications where an energy bridge could supply them with a rare form of energy, most peers would simply brush it off as one of many useless inventions.

This was not uncommon in the mech industry. A huge number of mech designers in human space advanced to Master every year.

While each of their accomplishments were no doubt worthy of celebration, that did not mean that their inventions were relevant to every mech design.

Some were widely applicable while others were so specific that only a tiny subset of mechs could derive any value from them. Even then, it was difficult for mech designers to recognize these possibilities.

Gloriana's expression suddenly turned sly. "Say... don't we have a few skulls left in storage?"

"What do you mean, honey?"

"What did you do with the remains of Venerable Ghanso and Venerable Foster?"

"Uhhh..."

He couldn't immediately recall what he had done with the bodies of those notable enemies. He stopped caring about their mortal coils once he had harvested their spiritualities.

He suddenly froze.

"Oh. I remember now. Didn't we give them a burial in space?"

Gloriana looked mortified! "WHAT?! What a waste! We could have used them to empower our expert pilots! Why did you throw their bodies away so soon!"

"They were soldiers! They deserved to be treated with dignity!"

"Pffff! Dignity." Gloriana contemptuously spat. "Weren't you the one who scooped out their spirits so that you could use them in other applications?"

"That was because I already recognized the use of their spiritualities back then! Their bones were completely worthless to me. We all thought that it would be best to bury them in space to give closure to our conflict."

"Even when they used to be our archenemies?"

"...Now that you mention it, maybe we let them off too lightly."

Chapter 4129 Conte Avaris

The completion of the Mars was a massive occasion for the Cross Clan.

In fact, its emergence not only had massive implications for the Cross Clan, but also affected the rest of the Golden Skull Alliance.

The news that Professor Benedict Cortez might be able to advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer was a massive bombshell to everyone!

Up until now, Ves was the most prominent mech designer in the alliance. It was hard to get around him and his design philosophy because his living mechs and his glows were just too iconic and useful.

The arrival of a Master would not only put a lot of the spotlight back onto the Cross Clan, but also raise the comprehensive strength and prestige of the entire alliance.

It made a huge difference whether an organization or a power bloc was able to retain a Master Mech Designer or not! The ability to employ one was one of the many important



criteria that other players paid attention to when evaluating the strength and value of different groups.

However, as much as the arrival of a Master Mech Designer could do much to make the public take the Golden Skull Alliance more seriously, there was another prospect that could benefit everyone even more.

The potential chance that Patriarch Reginald Cross would finally be able to follow in the footsteps of his late father could change everything!

The protection of an ace pilot was long regarded as one of the qualifiers to join the ranks of the bigshots of the new frontier.

Due to their insanely high battle effectiveness, an ace pilot paired with a powerful ace mech was able to fight against alien warships and gain an advantage if the disparity in firepower wasn't too great!

With the onset of transphasic mechs, that advantage became even more obvious. In a time where the use of warships by private parties was still prohibited, the presence of a powerful ace pilot was often seen as a guarantee of safety in the Age of Mechs!

This was because most groups simply couldn't compete against those who enjoyed the protection of a Saint. Ace mechs were practically invincible even when they squared off against tens of thousands of regular mechs at a time.

This effectively meant that they could win any conventional battle against conventional mech armies. It was no longer a matter of numbers or firepower. The absolute disparity in power was simply too great for small and medium players to overcome.

Morale was also a serious issue. Many mech pilots weren't even willing to fight against an ace mech head-on, so they would either perform far below their usual strength or outright mutiny against their own organization if they felt that their lives were being thrown away!

Even organizations that were powerful enough to retain ace pilots themselves would not easily put their top strategic assets at risk.

Ace pilots and ace mechs were the equivalent of weapons of mass destruction in the modern era. Their greatest value lay in their deterrence, their ability to prevent others from acting in a hostile manner.

A fight was inherently dangerous and chaotic. Anything could happen on the battlefield. The Cross Clan knew that quite well when the late Saint Hemmington Cross lost his life not by confronting an enemy in honorable combat, but by getting backstabbed by his erstwhile allies!

Rather than exposing their precious ace pilots to those risks, it was much safer and better for everyone involved to keep an ace pilot in reserve. Even if the powerful warrior did not step onto the battlefield, he or she already served a useful purpose.

In short, the chances that the Golden Skull Alliance would get attacked would become much lower once Patriarch Reginald broke through!

This would almost fully guarantee all of their safety in the coming years. Unless they took part in a conflict that was too big for the deterrence to remain effective, everyone in the alliance would probably have to worry less about provoking any new enemies in the coming decade.

Right now, the chance that the Cross Patriarch might be able to overcome the bottleneck that has confounded thousands of other expert pilots was quite high.

Reginald's circumstances were much better than the majority of his peers. He was over 70 years old, which meant he was just past his prime, but still in a good condition. His body was heavily augmented which meant that he was not as weak and feeble as others at this age.

He possessed over 50 years of combat experience. Not only did he grow up and fight in a star sector that glorified mech combat, he also fought a lot of major battles during the Cross Clan's flight from Majestic Teal and over the course of the initial grand expedition.

His resonance strength had steadily grown throughout all of the training and fighting. He did not stagnate like a few other expert pilots, which showed that his willpower had remained strong and vigorous throughout the years.

Now that his resonance strength reached 60 laveres, he was well within reach of breaking through. It was not necessary for his resonance strength to reach the extreme limit of 67 laveres to undergo his second apotheosis. He just needed a greater push in order to overcome the dreaded bottleneck.

There was good reason for people to believe that the Mars could serve as that powerful push.

It was already a known phenomenon that expert pilots tended to get awfully excited when they received a new expert mech, especially if it was substantially more powerful than normal.

It was also a known phenomenon that masterwork expert mechs were much more helpful in spurring on the growth and facilitating the breakthroughs of their respective pilots.

Now that the Mars abundantly satisfied both of these factors, even the Mech Trade Association recognized the potential implications.

It came as a considerable surprise to Ves when the MTA was not only willing to lend a hand, but also dispatch a considerably-sized starship to assist in security, monitoring and analysis-related tasks!

Security was particularly a concern to the Golden Skull Alliance. Since Davute only hosted 7 known ace pilots, the arrival of another one would definitely threaten a lot of established interests.

The chance that rivals would march out in strength in order to crush the Mars or the rest of the Golden Skull Alliance was not trivial!

However, once the MTA signaled its interest in this matter, those threats instantly faded away.

"The mechers are greedy bastards most of the time, but I can't deny that they can be useful in certain moments." Ves remarked over a communication channel when he heard the news.

Professor Benedict smiled. "It's not just them feeling generous this time. A large part of the reason why the MTA has taken an elevated interest in our situation is because the breakthrough of an ace pilot is of much greater significance than the breakthrough of expert pilots."

Although it was rare to come across expert pilots on an individual basis, there were still many of them on a statistical basis.

Ace pilots were much rarer, and thus more valuable, both to the states or organizations that retained them as well as the MTA.

Each ace pilot was a potential god pilot in the making. Being able to reach their current rank was already a legendary feat in itself! Compared to every other mech pilot, Saints were much closer to bridging the final gap to godhood.

While this was the most common reason why the mechers paid so much attention to ace pilots, Ves knew that there was probably a murkier reason why they valued halfgods so much.

The horrible revelations from Prosperous Hill VI came to mind.

Skulls weren't the only valuable resource that people could harvest from the bodies of high-ranking mech pilots.

The closer a person transcended their mortality, the more valuable their remains tended to be! This applied to every organic life form, not just humans!

Thus, when the Golden Skull Alliance traveled to an empty star system with half of its combined fleet, the arrival of an MTA warship caused Ves to entertain mixed feelings.

He had an illusion that the arriving mechs weren't just here to observe and assist in the coming testing sessions.

Instead, they were also here to size up Patriarch Reginald's evolved brain in order to estimate how many old and decrepit bastards might be able to gain another century of life.

Ves wasn't stupid enough to mention any of these thoughts to anyone. He played stupid and genuinely prepared to welcome the new arrivals.

"What a big ship."

The new arrival was not as big as the Paracelsus Optimus, but she was still an impressive vessel for different reasons.

The Paracelsus Optimus was an all-in-one battlecarrier that was part of the MTA's 307th Pacification Fleet, whatever that meant.

The Conte Avaris was a so-called logistics cruiser that was part of the MTA's 765th Assault Fleet.

The differences in the names of their fleets mattered a lot. While the Pacification Fleet was largely preoccupied with cleanup duty, the Assault Fleet was primarily engaged in barging into alien territory and breaking apart the defenses of any indigenous forces!

As a result, the 765th Assault Fleet had seen a lot of action ever since the Big Two stepped up its invasion of the Red Ocean!

The aggressive nature of this fleet was reflected in the Conte Avaris. The 'logistics' cruiser did not resemble a typical vessel that was dedicated to repairing mechs and other war material in the field.

Her armor belt was thick and she also boasted a respectable collection of primary and secondary armaments.

In order to facilitate her repair and transportation functions, her hull was relatively wide and fat, causing the logistic cruisers to look a lot more bloated.

As a result, her mobility was relatively disappointing compared to other MTA warships.

Still, the Conte Avaris was definitely intimidating on her own. The fact that the MTA found it worthwhile enough to dispatch such a large warship to this star system showed how much it cared about Patriarch Reginald's potential breakthrough.

Ves, Gloriana, Juliet and Sara all received an invitation to meet with the leading MTA dignitary aboard the flagship of the Cross Clan.

The four Larkinsons adorned their best dress uniforms before boarding a shuttle that ferried them over to the Hemmington Cross.

Once there, they stood next to Professor Benedict Cortez as they all waited for the delegation from the MTA.

The Senior of the Cross Clan looked much different from before. He had lost a portion of his guardedness and exuded a lot more confidence and satisfaction.

Now that his road to Master was both straight and clear, Benedict had finally succeeded in overcoming his greatest heartache and obsession!

"You look really good, Benedict." Ves said in appreciation. "Your uniform suits you well."

"Thank you, Ves. I can finally wear this outfit with pride."

The dress uniform that was marked in the Cross Clan's colors of white and pale blue no longer seemed incongruous to the mech designer. The older man's sense of belonging towards the Crossers had clearly grown.

As Ves and Benedict continued to chat for a time, the space in front of them suddenly buzzed.

The MTA delegation teleported over without a hitch. Among the dozens of the personnel dispatched by the Conte Avaris, one of them clearly stood out from the rest.

Ves could easily spot a Master Mech Designer through their spiritual presences alone. The woman was a new one that he had yet to meet before!

"Master Amphi Helecos. It is good to meet you in person." Professor Benedict said as he made a light bow in greeting.

"You have exceeded our expectations. Good."

"I cannot claim all of the credit, Master. My colleagues from the Larkinson Clan have played a vital role in the development of the Mars."

The woman whose presence carried a lot of invisible weight briefly swept her view across the Larkinson Journeymen.

"The next generations of mech designers have become more and more impressive over time. The Survivalists and the Transhumanists have staked a powerful claim on you. A shame. I would have pulled you into our gathering myself if I learned about you sooner."

What could Ves say towards that? He settled for maintaining a polite expression.

"I look forward to hearing your evaluation of my latest work."

"Oh, I will certainly provide you with that and more."

Though the Master looked like an old woman that had seen a lot of years, it was clear she was a driven leader. She exuded a lot more decisiveness and proactivity compared to Master Willix!

#### Chapter 4130 Master Amphi Helecos

When Ves quietly looked up the Master's name on the galactic net, he found out that Master Amphi Helecos was quite an impressive figure within the MTA.

She was over 360 years old, which meant she had grown up during the early days of the Age of Mechs.

Though humanity's recovery was already in full swing at that time, the scars of the Age of Conquest were still raw as well.

Most people from those generations tended to develop a strong dislike against the excesses of the past.

The reckless genetic modification of humans along with the unrestricted use of warships and weapons of mass destruction became almost universally reviled for multiple reasons.

As a result, people such as Master Barnard Solas Voiken overwhelmingly aligned themselves with groups that advocated for peace, order and the preservation of humanity.

Someone as old as Master Amphi Helecos should have become a fellow compatriot of the Voiken Patriarch, but instead she threw her lot in with a group that held the opposite ideals!

Though Ves wasn't able to find much about Master Amphi's background on the galactic net, Professor Benedict had filled him in on the important woman political stance when they brought the MTA delegation to the hangar bay where the Mars was stored.

While Master Amphi and her expansive team of mech designers and engineers poured over the newly-built masterwork expert mech, Ves soon understood why Master Amphi acted so familiar with Benedict.

"She's an Unbounder?!" Ves softly gasped.

"That is correct. Don't look so strange. The members of the Unbound Humanity Faction are not much different from people such as you and I. They are still passionate about mechs, but they believe that humanity should follow a different direction from the prevailing consensus."

"Is she dangerous?"

"You don't need to worry about that, Ves. She is on our side. Master Amphi may hold aggressive ideas, but none of them are directed towards us, at least specifically."

That did not sound good to Ves. "What do you mean by that, exactly?"

Professor Benedict sighed. "She is part of a faction that believes in removing most of the oversight that the Big Two maintain over human society. The Unbounders believe that the artificial rules and restrictions have limited our potential as a race and crippled our strength relative to other civilizations. Therefore, even if revoking all of the taboos and many other rules will result in much more violent wars between the states, the followers of this ideology eventually believe the humans that are able to survive at the end will be the strongest and most worthwhile additions to humanity."

Although it was easy to talk about rescinding rules, the consequences of doing so were anything but abstract!

"An enormous amount of human suffering will ensue if the Unbounders have their way!" Ves responded. "I don't like to agree with the Preservers, but I think they are correct in assuming that humanity is made up of beasts. It only takes a few rabid animals to trigger mass genocide."

Benedict sighed. "The Unbounders do not necessarily believe we will repeat the mistakes of the past, especially now that we are more aware of what might happen. They insist that the retention of weak states that have grown so weak that they are unable to resist alien forces is a worse development than the alternatives. Rather than allowing large parts of humanity to continue to degenerate into sheep, they want to change the rules of the game so that we can become wolves again. That was what most of humanity was like during the Age of Conquest."

The rhetoric all sounded nice and all, but the consequences couldn't be foreseen!

What Ves found insidious about this stance was that a part of him felt that it made a lot of sense. A lot of human states and groups had indeed degenerated into a weaker version of humanity in the past.

The Big Two was directly to blame for this. Their overreaction towards humanity's abuses in the past had prompted them to create a giant cage around human space where they kept all of the so-called space peasants under a controlled regime.

Just like animals in a zoo, a huge number of space peasants would not be able to survive the transition if they were ever dumped back into the wild!

Whether the original policies of the Big Two did more harm than good to human civilization was not important to Ves. What mattered was that they lived in a reality where the overwhelming proportion of humans were unable to possess any agency in a future dictated by the Unbounders.

Ves frowned. "What's your take on this, then?"

The Senior Mech Designer made a wry smile.

"I cannot reveal too much to you, but let me just say a future where the MTA and CFA maintain a strong hold over every human does not sound like a utopia to me. The Unbounders are one of the few groups of mechers who support initiatives to weaken the power and influence of the MTA. They are very courageous in that regard, but they are also regarded as rebels and contrarians as a consequence. Given my... history... I feel most at home when I am in their company."

A man who used to be chummy with pirates and went by the moniker of the Skull Architect would certainly feel that way!

"I understand." Ves replied. "You didn't have much choice to begin with, I guess."

"It is not just that. The Unbounders have genuinely provided me with vital support in a situation where my value was not entirely clear to them. They believe that I am an excellent representative of their ideals, as strange as that may sound."

These Unbounders certainly sounded like whackos. Ves hoped that Master Amphi Helecos wouldn't pull him into any of her faction's crazy initiatives!

Ves and his fellow mech designers quietly waited at the side while the MTA delegation conducted their thorough examination.

From what it looked like, the Mars presented so many new and interesting applications and combinations that the mechers would probably be busy for a longer time than usual.

The Mars had reached a degree of power and technical complexity that the mechers were taking it a lot more seriously than any other second-class expert mech.

The MTA hadn't shown nearly as much enthusiasm towards the Minerva!

Fortunately, Master Amphi Helecos did not get lost in studying the Mars entirely. She pulled herself out of her fascination and slowly floated over to the group of waiting mech designers.



"Your mech bears a great amount of interesting tech." She told Professor Benedict. "Some of them are highly technological in nature while others are less conventional in their principles. The fusion of the two into a coherent mech frame produces many interesting reactions. I have examined more expert mechs than I can count, many of which are much more powerful than your Mars due to their first-class nature, but few of them are as daring and filled with unconventional innovations as yours. Bravo. The Mars presents a fantastic case study to us. We have decided to reward you with 5 million MTA merits for your contribution."

"Thank you for your recognition." Professor Benedict bowed in thanks. "I shall endeavor to do better next time."

"I look forward to seeing you succeed. Your latest innovation is brilliant and has many interesting uses, but it is a pity that you have not standardized it as of yet. You can look forward to receiving many rewards once you have completed this step."

That would be the point where Professor Benedict likely advanced to Master.

After chatting with Benedict for a few more minutes, the old woman finally turned to the Larkinsons.

Surprisingly enough, she did not settle her eyes on Ves, but rather paid special attention to Gloriana!

"I am told that you are responsible for the special phenomenon that is slowly but constantly affecting the entire frame of the Mars."

"That is correct, Master!" Gloriana eagerly chirped.

Master Amphi directed a generous smile towards the young mother. "Your method of empowerment is one of the most exotic that I have witnessed in the last five decades. It reminds me of a particular piece of alien tech that I have encountered in the past. If you are willing, I can introduce you to that tech. We can make comparisons and learn what you have in common with the aliens and what you can learn from their own technological framework."

"I would love to do that, Master! I have very little to compare my god body tech. If I can gain inspiration or ready-made solutions from other examples, I can make my next implementation much more effective!"

After she displayed her interest in Gloriana's latest obsession, the Master finally deigned to tell the Larkinsons their rewards.

"My staff and I have each recognized your contributions to your latest masterwork expert mech. Each of you will receive another masterwork certificate as well as 750,000 MTA merits into your accounts. Do you have any questions or objections?"

Ves tried his best to maintain a neutral expression.

To be honest, he was a little dissatisfied. Why did Professor Benedict obtain 5 million MTA merits while he only received a fraction of that amount?

Sure, Professor Benedict had definitely carried them all during the fabrication run this time, but the Mars would never have become such a fantastic mech without the help of the Larkinson Clan!

Aside from all of the unique elements that Ves and Gloriana added to the expert mech design, it was also the Hammer of Brilliance that was chiefly responsible for putting Professor Benedict into a huge inspired state!

If Master Amphi truly wanted to be fair, then she should have granted all of the MTA merits meant for Professor Benedict to the Larkinsons!

Of course, Ves did not voice any of these thoughts. It was not only difficult for others to accept this explanation, but he did not have any backing at the moment.

Master Amphi and Professor Benedict were part of the same faction, so it was natural for the former to favor the latter.

"When will you begin your initial test?" Master Amphi tasked after she was done with the official announcements.

"We can begin as soon as you and your men complete your inspection." Professor Benedict replied. "We have completed all of our preparations in advance. Considering what might happen once Patriarch Reginald Cross pilots the Mars for the first time, we have prepared a long and elaborate session that is designed to give the combination plenty of opportunities to test their newfound might."

"We would like to assist in the process."

"In what way, Master?"

"We think it may be useful for the Mars to spar against a handful of our mechs."

"Your cooperation would be appreciated."

Normally, it was ludicrous to pit any second-class mech against one of the MTA's own machines!

Although reasonably powerful second-class expert mechs such as the Everchanger were able to close the gap to a degree, Ves did not think his own work was able to get the better in such a bout.

The Mars was much different, however. Ves believed it stood a decent chance of defeating a first-class multipurpose mech even if Patriarch Reginald had yet to advance to ace pilot!

Of course, the range in power between different first-class multipurpose mechs was incredibly big. There were probably top machines that were so overwhelmingly powerful that they could probably overpower the Mars by relying on brute force!

The only way the Mars would be able to stand a chance against these elite first-class mechs was if Reginald succeeded in becoming a Saint!

This was why everyone held so much anticipation towards this initial testing session. Compared to earning another bag of MTA merits, gaining an ace pilot was the real reward as far as everyone in the Golden Skull Alliance was concerned!

"We shall expedite our inspection as much as possible so that we can begin within this day." Master Amphi promised.

Even she sounded excited!