

## Mech 3171

### *Chapter 3171: Show Off*

The Amaranto's performance significantly exceeded everyone's expectations.

Ves, Gloriana and many other Larkinsons who were able to witness the new expert mech in action had become incredibly jubilant about their accomplishment!

Not only was the Amaranto able to plug an important gap in the Larkinson Army's lineup, it also showed a glimpse of the future of expert mechs that possessed prime mech capabilities.

The Journeymen all took a well-deserved rest as soon as the fleet transitioned into FTL. They went to bed knowing that they had absolutely created a mech that they could take pride in for the rest of their lives.

In the next morning, Ves woke up feeling more warm and comfortable than ever. His wife pressed her body against hers, allowing him to feel her body warmth.

She was still in slumber though he knew it wouldn't take long for her to wake up as well.

"Miaow."

Clixie was already sitting beside Gloriana's pillow. As a cat, she possessed a different sleeping cycle, which was an important aspect in allowing her to stay on guard at night.

"Did Gloriana sleep well?"

"Miaow."

"That's good to hear."

One of his hands reached down to touch his wife's belly. At this stage of the pregnancy, a small bump had already formed, though it would take a bit more time for it to gain enough definition to be visible no matter what clothes she wore.

This was the first time that he was truly able to inspect his unborn daughter after all of the events that had happened during the start of the fabrication session. He never expected the Superior Mother to just descend and bless her future granddaughter right when the Journeymen had just embarked on one of their most important and critical endeavors.

The fact that Gloriana and the others were able to take advantage of this phenomenon to create their strongest and most exceptional mech yet was a massive bonus!

"Heh, it's all thanks to you, little girl." Ves grinned as he softly rubbed his palm across his wife's belly.

If Gloriana never decided to become pregnant at this period, the Superior Mother wouldn't have been inclined to show up. How the Amaranto would end up in that case was anyone's guess.

"Perhaps we would have gotten close enough regardless."

Ves wasn't complaining about the current outcome. Not only was he potentially able to save one of his precious gems, his daughter also gained a substantial boost!

When Ves finally inspected his daughter with his spiritual senses, he noticed that the fetus already exuded a considerably stronger presence. Her spirituality remained pristine, but it had gained a lot of firmness. This was a crucial improvement that would make her much less susceptible to external influences.

"That's not the biggest change, though."

He recalled that the Superior Mother poured most of her efforts into his unborn daughter's body. When Ves swept his senses across the fetus, he was only able to perceive a limited degree of changes.

His baby's body felt a bit more substantial to his senses. Yet no matter how many times he inspected his daughter's cells, he wasn't able to find any differences.

What did the Superior Mother do? What was her goal?

Ves seriously doubted that she went through all of that effort just to give her unborn granddaughter a pat in the back. There had to be more behind this move that he was not able to figure out. He needed to make a lot more progress in spiritual engineering before he was able to discern the exact changes.

"She's a lot better than before." He instinctively judged.

He did not feel that anything was amiss as he scanned his baby. If this wasn't the case, he would have forcibly interrupted the Superior Mother's ritual no matter how well-meaning it seemed!

"Ves..." His wife opened her eyes and smiled warmly at him. She placed her hand above his own. "Our daughter is going to be so strong one day. Not even I received so many blessings. With the Superior Mother as her grandparent, our baby will enjoy all of the care and attention she needs to become great. Maybe even greater than us, hihi!"

They spent over ten minutes wondering about their future daughter before they left their bed and readied themselves for their day.

The big project was already complete, but there were more projects that needed to be completed. The Amaranto also had to be checked over. Though the chances that a part had prematurely worn out was low, they needed to do their due diligence. They also had to inspect and scan every part of their latest work in order to see how exceptional it had become after it had become a masterwork.

However, before the couple could exit their grand stateroom and head over to the design lab, their bodies suddenly dematerialized from existence.

"Miaow!"

Clixie immediately panicked as she saw Ves and Gloriana disappear from view.

"ALARM!"

Their guards acted as if someone just poked them in their eyes! However, before they could do anything further, a small card materialized.

Clixie caught it before it fell to the ground and studied it with a confused expression.

"Miaow?"

Nitaa's armored form stepped forward and took the card. Her expression grew grim as she apparently received an answer of what had happened.

"It's the MTA."

She did not entirely believe the card, but from what had happened, the powerful organization had somehow managed to teleport a pair of humans while the Spirit of Bentheim was still traveling in FTL!

The level of sophistication that such an act required was unattainable to any of the local states in the Yeina and Bardo Star Clusters. Only the Big Two were powerful enough to accomplish such a feat.

Despite the fact that the MTA discretely informed the Larkinson Clan of their actions, the clansmen nonetheless began to sweep their ships. Who knew whether the MTA actually took action?

While the Larkinsons were scouring through all of their ships, the people who were teleported by surprise re-emerged in a completely different compartment.

Ves normally would have panicked and summoned the Amastendira if he was teleported in this fashion, but he carefully maintained his composure and observed what was happening.

He expected the MTA to come knocking sooner or later. Though he did not predict the mechers would make a huge power play by showing that they could take him from his ship during FTL travel anytime they liked, this action completely fit their profile.

"Ves." Ketis called from the side.

She and Juliet had been summoned as well. This made it more than clear that they were definitely here because of their latest accomplishment.

"Larkinsons. It appears that I have been forced to visit you once again." A very familiar voice called from the side.

Master Willix approached once again. She looked quite appreciative of the four Journeymen, but paid special attention to Ves and Gloriana.

"I apologise for bringing you aboard this battleship in this fashion, but I needed to brief you before anyone else had the opportunity to reach you. What you have accomplished is a great feat that will ring across the mech industry, but it will also lead to severe disruptions to your lives."

"How so, ma'am?" Ves carefully asked.

"I will explain that and more to you in a moment."

Before he could ask another question, Master Willix snapped her fingers, causing everyone to teleport out of the empty chamber and straight into a mech workshop!

When Ves got his bearings, he curiously scanned the entire workshop. Its clean metal walls were just as bare as before, and there were no exposed tool racks or traditional production equipment that he could see. He only managed to spot a few huge but completely unfamiliar machines that reminded him of a lot of materialization technology.

They weren't here in order to fabricate a mech. They were here so that Master Willix could reunite them with Amaranto.

"You guys teleported an entire mech?" Ves asked in a nervous tone of voice.

"Teleportation technology is much more versatile than you think." Master Willix answered. "Under the right circumstances, we can teleport people, gasses, mechs, ship components and even antimatter bombs."

Yikes! Ves could immediately recognize how much terror these actions could sow, particularly if the MTA had already shown the ability to perform teleportation while traveling through FTL!

"You don't need to worry about that." Master Willix said. "Teleportation technology becomes more ubiquitous at the first-class level, but you will also begin to encounter anti-teleportation measures. Also, the teleportation that we have performed is extremely difficult to perform by anyone except for us and the CFA. Our battleship actually had to approach extremely close to your factory ship during FTL travel in order to lock your coordinates, and that is not something that anyone can do. Outside of FTL, just make sure that no foreign ship gets close. If that cannot be prevented, then your ship should activate every possible shield generator. The energy shields they project naturally produce enough disturbances to make it substantially more difficult to teleport anything in or out."

This was a valuable lesson. Ves suspected that Master Willix deliberately showed off the MTA's teleportation tech in order to make him aware of the potential dangers.

"What should I do if that is not enough?"

"If you truly wish to guard yourselves ahead of time, it shouldn't be too much of a challenge to purchase the latter in exchange for a large amount of credits or a more modest sum of merits."

Ves inwardly sighed in relief. As long as it could be bought, he would not have to worry too much.

He directed his view back to his own creation. The dormant red masterwork expert mech already exuded a strong presence without even doing anything. Even Master Willix couldn't help but look admiringly at the great creation.

There was one nagging uncertainty, though.

"Will you be taking my mech away?" He hesitantly asked.

He didn't forget that the MTA expressed a strong interest in the Little Angel. The masterwork mech that Ves and his wife had created long ago had already fallen into the Association's hands

"We won't." Willix immediately reassured him. "You can trust us on that. There are multiple reasons why we will not take it away. First, it is disrespectful to take a masterwork version of an expert mech away from its original owner because it is meant to serve a specific mech pilot. Mass market models are designed to serve a wide variety of people. This makes it easy to adapt the masterwork versions of these mechs for another purpose. Not so for your Amaranto."

That made a lot of sense. Ves also gathered an important clue from this answer. The MTA was evidently making use of the masterwork mechs in an unknown fashion.

"Second, it is disrespectful towards you, the creators. Your status and importance is no longer as trivial as they were in the past. I will be explaining this to you later, but with this accomplishment, you have finally entered the true galactic community."

That sounded both good and bad. Ves did not like the implications of this as he was largely relying on his relative lack of fame to coast by without attracting any dangerous attention.

"Third, if we frequently take masterwork mechs away from their creators or owners without their consent, no one will make them anymore. Creating a masterwork of any mech is an event that should be pursued by every mech designer. Succeeding in making one should not make you feel as if you are punished. That is the exact opposite of what should be the case. The Association has always insisted that great creators like you should be rewarded for your success."

Ves truly relaxed at this time. This answer made the most sense. The MTA was a farsighted organization and always tried to keep the mech industry as productive and innovative as possible... While it restricted technologies and messed with mech pilots on a regular basis, their overall goals had never changed.

*Chapter 3172: Hesserian Bardine*

Master Willix didn't appear to be in a hurry to talk about the Amaranto.

After reassuring Ves and the Larkinsons that the MTA was not about to take away their expert mech or retain them as 'permanent guests', everyone relaxed.

While working for the MTA was a dream to many mech designers, none of the four had much appetite to pursue a career in the Association.

Despite the immense wealth and power at the MTA's disposal, the Larkinson mech designers were more than confident that they would be able to climb up to the same height one day.

This especially applied to Ves and Gloriana. The former held a lot of confidence in his unique talents as well as the System. The latter was just confident because she was Gloriana.

The other two Journeymen did not have any thoughts either.

Juliet did not have any other thoughts because she took her vows to the Larkinson Clan seriously. As for Ketis, her status as a swordmaster made it impossible for her to associate too closely with the MTA.

Willix surely knew their attitudes, so she was quick to assure them that the MTA did not intend to take them away for too long.

"We'll return you and your expert mech to your factory ship by the end of the day."

"That long?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "What will we be doing here?"

"Ah, you don't seem to understand. Well, you should brace yourselves, because you have become quite the talk of the town within certain circles within the MTA. Why do you think that we would go out of our way to dispatch an entire battleship to your fleet and put extra effort into teleporting you over while in FTL travel?"

Ves had a lot of questions about that, but he refrained from asking them. Ever since he was moved over to this unknown vessel, he felt as if he was being observed by a million different sensors. His every move was probably being tracked and analyzed by both humans and AIs.

In fact, shortly after he had been unwillingly brought over to this supposed MTA battleship, he had already employed one of his own tricks to make him appear more calm and composed. He did not want to leak out anything too delicate such as the System or his extremely controversial mother through his words or his body language.

Though he wished he was wearing his more impressive dress uniform right now, his daily outfit would have to do. He offered the Master a smile.

"We shall be in your care."

"Good. Before we proceed, let us analyze your handiwork first."

A gap smoothly appeared on the ceiling. Hundreds of different people floated through this opening and began to surround the Amaranto from all sides.

Ves did not dare to sweep any of them with his spiritual senses, but from his passive spiritual vision, he could immediately identify that each of them were high-ranking mech designers.

There were at least fourteen Masters and thirty Seniors among the group of buzzing mech designers. The remainder were Journeymen who mostly assisted their superiors in scanning different parts of the mechs with their specialized handheld scanning equipment.

The exaggerated lineup of impressive MTA Masters momentarily floored Ves. Even if it was unusual for a bunch of Journeymen to successfully create a masterwork expert mech, he didn't think it would warrant so much attention from the mechers!

Was it because of the young age of the creators?

Was it because of the improved luminar crystal technology incorporated in the design?

There had to be a compelling reason why these impressive mech designers showed so much interest in the works of just a handful of Journeymen.

One of the Masters who was admiring the craftsmanship of the Amaranto turned around and descended as he flew in the direction of Master Willix. Once he reached the woman's side, he immediately said something critical.

"It is undeniable. I don't need to study the mech any longer to confirm that its design has been 'twewaked' by a mech designer who is far superior to you. From the integration of the resonating exotics to the mech frame to the clearly superior implementations of luminar crystal technology, I am 16 percent certain that the mech designer responsible is a highly advanced Master Mech Designer and 79 percent certain that we are dealing with the work of a Star Designer."

A grave silence stretched as the unknown older Master issued his professional judgement. The wave of silence stretched for so long that Ves bet that they were talking to each other through a private internal network.

The Master likely said those words for the benefit of the guests.

Ves finally understood what the excitement was all about. It turned out that the fake patron he invented had acted a bit too exaggerated lately!

He realized that he had inadvertently given a lot more credence that he was backed by an unknown Star Designer by employing the Superpublish function.

This seemingly simple-sounding System ability was supposed to improve the overall performance of a mech by 10 percent. This didn't sound too impressive until Ves realized that it had also applied to Master Willix's contribution to the Sentry Project!

Ves wasn't sure how powerful of a Master she was, but her relative prominence in the Association signified that she was quite powerful even among other Masters.

"It is good to hear that humanity boasts another Star Designer." Willix eventually replied in an even tone. "We are beset by enemies on all sides and face numerous great challenges that threaten our current order. It is a pity that he is among the more elusive of his kind."

"The Mech Trade Association is the greatest and definite authority on mechs in human space. It is disturbing to know that there is one more Star Designer in existence that has never cooperated with us. He can do much more for humanity if he assists us in our grand designs rather than occasionally lend a hand to one of his favored seeds."

"It is not up to inferior designers such as us to question the motives of His Excellency. That is best left to other Star Designers or galactic mech councilors. This case is already being led by Her Excellency."

There was a lot of spicy information in their conversation. Ves was keenly aware that the Masters were trying to put up a show. They indirectly accused Mr. S. of being an idiot for not aligning himself to the MTA and did so in a neutral voice that was completely devoid of emotions.

Ves didn't realize it, but Master Willix always showed a bit more humanity when she spoke to Ves and Gloriana. Yet now that she was speaking to what appeared to be another rational mech designer, she didn't bother with any pretenses.

To be honest, Ves felt a bit disturbed and intimidated by the two Masters. The way they talked and the way they held themselves was so cold and devoid of emotions that they sounded like bots at some points!

"Master Falkner, you should return to studying the Amaranto. You are our foremost expert on energy weapons aboard the Hesserian Bardine. There are many impatient researchers who are demanding a detailed analysis on the Amaranto's crystal armament."

"I shall transmit a report to you in two hours, though we should also interview the designer of the weapon himself for clarification."

Master Falkner directed a peculiar glance towards Ves. It was as if he saw the Journeyman as an interesting experimental specimen.

For a moment, Ves felt as if he was standing in the shoes of his test subjects.

"I shall take care of that, Falkner." Master Willix finally showed a touch of pointed emotion this time.

Eventually, the older man flew back to the Amaranto and approached its luminar crystal rifle before slowly caressing its smooth surface with his hands.

Master Willix guided the four Larkinson mech designers towards the side of the workshop. As they approached a bulkhead, a circular gap spontaneously formed. Everyone smoothly passed through, though Ves curiously looked back to see that the bulkhead regained its original form, showing no hint of a hatch or opening.

"None of you have ever had the pleasure of touring an MTA battleship, am I correct?" Master Willix asked as she transitioned back to a friendlier facade.

"Uhm, no." Ketis straightforwardly asked. "We did explore a CFA battleship, once."

"Yes, I am aware. You have made quite the gains from that adventure." Willix said as her eyes twinkled in an interesting manner. "The Hesserian Bardine is a different vessel altogether. Let me introduce her to you. In the interests of time, please step on these platforms."

They each stepped on a circular floater platform that automatically lifted up and began to move them across the wide and spacious navy blue hallways at an elevated pace.

While the corridors weren't large enough to allow mechs to pass through, they boasted enough height for the floater platforms to fly above the heads of the mechers walking on the deck.

The lack of congestion meant that they were quickly able to reach another section of the Hesserian Bardine. They reached a wide cavern that was packed with first-class multipurpose mechs!

Ves and the other Larkinson mech designers couldn't help but stare and admire the powerful and exquisitely designed machines. Though they were only able to glean a hint of their capabilities, what little they managed to figure out was already astonishing!

"Our Association's concept of battleships differ from that of the Common Fleet Alliance." Master Willix smiled as she saw her guests becoming suitably impressed. "We have always insisted on the primacy of mechs over warships. However, the latter has been in development for millenia while mechs have only properly taken flight in the last four centuries. It is completely logical for warships and especially battleships to play an essential role in our civilization's continued existence."

Now that Master Willix had turned back into her PR-friendly persona, Ves felt a lot more relaxed around her. His familiarity with her had long caused him to feel a lot less hesitant about acting casually around her. The recent events as well as the treatment that she was giving only reinforced this impression.

"You and your Association wish to change that, right?"

"It is the common goal of all mech designers to lead humanity towards a future that will make vessels such as the Hesserian Bardine obsolete. Until this transition ends, we must make compromises. Just as the CFA makes use of mechs under necessary circumstances, so do we make use of warships in order to pursue our goals."

They watched over the mech workshop a little longer. Though Master Willix did not elaborate on any of the powerful first-class multipurpose mechs on display, it was already a treat to see them in the flesh.

"Impressive, are they not?"

The four mech designers simultaneously nodded.

"Then what if I tell you that they are inferior to the Amaranto that you have just made?"

That remark threw them all for a loop. How could the MTA's finest designs ever be worse than a very good expert mech that was ultimately just a second-class machine?

"I would ask what criteria you are using to issue this judgement." Ves carefully answered. "From a performance perspective, all of the notable features of the Amaranto ultimately can't match up against any of your Association's standard-issue mechs."

It was a harsh truth, but an undeniable one. He had recently witnessed how a small squad of first-class multipurpose mechs completely dismantled the Uranus, a titanic biojuggernaut that was definitely a lot more powerful than the Amaranto due to its sheer size and scale!

"We are proud of our work, but our design is not entirely of our own work." Gloriana admitted. "You as well as Mr. S. have been key in elevating our mech design to an impressive standard. We merely put the icing on the cake."

Master Willix chuckled. "It is that icing that is crucial to the MTA, the mech industry and perhaps humanity as a whole. What you perceive to be a minor contribution is actually the ingredient that can make all of the difference. This is why all of these mechs designed by esteemed Masters that you see before you are inferior. They are technically without flaws, their entire existences are flawed from the start. Don't you see? This is not the direction that mechs should be heading for. They are misshapen children."

"..."

Ketis scratched her head. "I don't know, Master... They look really good in my eyes."

*Chapter 3173: Rungs of a Ladder*

None of the four Larkinson mech designers understood why Master Willix disparaged the proud works of her fellow colleagues!

In the interests of self-preservation, neither Ves nor any other of the guests voiced anything negative about the mechs. Perhaps one of the designers of these powerful machines was among the Masters that were currently studying the Amaranto.

Master Willix didn't seem to mind the lackluster reaction. She gave them another smile before leading them away from the massive hangar bay.

"Come, let me show you around the other parts of our fine vessel."

They flew above the heads of other mechers as they headed to another section. They briefly toured various departments such as those responsible for mech fabrication, mech pilot training and more.

They even paid a brief visit to the control center of a massive main gun turret. The sheer amount of firepower that this gun could unleash at a decent rate of fire was absolutely astounding and completely overwhelmed the guests.

"This weapon is powerful enough to crack a moon, if not a planet!" Gloriana exclaimed!

The Amaranto's full-powered shot was like a needle prick compared to this humongous beast!

"It is merely the dumbest application of weapon technology." Master Willix said in a distinctly unimpressed tone. "As I am sure you know well, building big is the easy way out. From the moment humanity stepped into the stars, we constantly pursued greater and greater strength. The best way that our race can attain this goal is by building larger and larger warships. Hence why the size of battleships has continued to balloon over time. Newer advancements, better materials and increasing pressure has constantly pushed us to upsize our battleships even further."

"How long is the Hesserian Bardine?"

"She is just over 8 kilometers. She's a middling battleship by our standards."

Despite the Hesserian Bardine's shorter length in comparison to the Starlight Megalodon, the MTA battleship was a lot more modern and a lot more powerful!

It was too bad that they weren't able to see much of that in their tour. The interiors of many compartments were distressingly clean and free of any clutter that could give away some helpful clues. The mechs didn't talk out loud that much and instead relied on their sophisticated implants to communicate through their private ship network.

They continued the brief tour. After briefly looking at some basic ship systems, they finally visited a more interesting department. They entered a large hall that contained a lot of huge machines that were immense in a way that Ves could hardly describe.

The machines were as large as corvettes and were shaped like rectangular cubes covered with a grey metal material.

"What are they?" Gloriana widened her eyes as she tried to make sense of the metallic monstrosities.

"These are one of the vital systems that define the role of the Hesserian Bardine. While I will not explain them in detail, I can tell you that they are responsible for tracking and interdicting starships traveling through FTL. They are essential to waging war in FTL space."

Ves tried his best not to shudder. The concept of warfare in the higher dimensions was a frightening idea. To most of humanity, FTL travel was merely a means to get from point A to point B a lot faster than relying on conventional propulsion.

The tech in the hands of most people only enabled them to travel through the higher dimensions, and only reluctantly. They lacked the sensors and advanced theories to

perceive what was beyond them and to find and target other vessels that might be traveling nearby.

Evidently, that was not a problem for the Big Two. Their advancements in FTL technology were so much further ahead that the rules didn't apply to them anymore!

"Does the MTA make use of this interdiction function often?"

Willix simply responded with a stare.

"Ehm, never mind."

They proceeded with the tour. For several hours, Willix led them from one advanced compartment to another. The rather utilitarian metal interior of the Hesserian Bardine along with the mostly silent and professional-looking mechers occupying the vessel made it seem as if they were in a secret military base.

Given the clues that Master Willix had provided to the guests, it appeared quite likely that the Hesserian Bardine was mainly used to perform clandestine missions!

The implicit threat caused Ves to shudder inwardly. From tracking systems that could precisely sniff out ships traveling in the deeper reaches of the higher dimensions to teleporters that could seamlessly replace a human being with a biologically identical clone, the interdiction battleship could employ an endless amount of methods to infiltrate, sabotage and destroy anyone and anything traveling through FTL!

Ves had a small suspicion that one of the reasons why the Big Two favored portal jumping was to prevent shenanigans like these from happening to themselves.

In the end, the tour had been both revealing and non-revealing. Master Willix placed a considerable emphasis on specific examples of high technology that she felt the Larkinsons should know about, but she cleverly avoided many other properties that were best left hidden.

Ves had the feeling that the areas she brought him to had already been deliberately cleaned up so that they did not give out any clues the MTA would rather stay hidden. It was what he would do if he was in a position of power and needed to impress some yokels.

Eventually, they entered a lab area where a lot of mech designers were developing mechs or performing research related to them behind closed doors. Master Willix led them to a spacious, high-tech lab that was currently rather barren but could easily summon lots of tools and materials on demand if needed.

Upon entry, a table and several leg-less chairs emerged from the deck like it was made of ooze and took on a clean white coloration. The design of the furniture was both clean but possessed a touch of elegance as well.

"Ahhh..."

The comfort level of the chair was a lot more pleasant than Ves expected!

He couldn't help but want to take one of these floating chairs back to his own ship so he could luxuriate in it all day.

Once everyone settled down, Master Willix began to ask a basic-sounding question.

"What is a masterwork?"

None of the Larkinsons knew how to begin. Ves looked at everyone for a moment before making an attempt.

"A masterwork is... a creation that matches but also exceeds a given design."

Willix followed up with a slight smirk. "Can masterworks be made without a design in mind?"

"..."

He never thought about that, and neither did the other Larkinson mech designers. They knew far too little about what a masterwork even meant. While they had successfully made at least one masterwork creation, they lacked far too much knowledge about it. This was why it was so difficult for any of them to reproduce their earlier success.

"It would have been nice if we had access to a textbook or a manual on masterworks." Ketis spoke up. "Everyone is being so damn vague about it that it's impossible for us to know exactly what we're dealing with. I thought the MTA was all about sharing knowledge."

Oh, Ketis. Ves inwardly sighed. Though he shared the same thoughts, he wouldn't have brought them up in such a blunt manner.

Willix didn't seem to mind, though.

"We have found that there is little point in sharing what we know and how we think about masterworks." She said in a matter-of-fact tone. "However, since you have come to our attention because of your unlikely success in creating a masterwork expert mech, I am authorized to enlighten you to some of our theories."

"Theories?" Ves questioned.

"Yes, theories. Very few of us possess a deeper understanding of what a masterwork constitutes."

It was rare for the MTA to admit that there were fields of research that even they didn't know a lot about.

The Master Mech Designer stretched out a hand, causing a rather simple mug to materialize in existence. Soon enough, the cup was filled with a warm and steaming liquid.

"Would you call this cup a good work of craftsmanship?" She asked before she took a casual sip of coffee.

"I would say... not." Gloriana took the initiative to answer this time. "It is an efficient design that is devoid of any extraneous elements, but it does no more than that. The cup itself was produced by an automated production method that literally prints products in the air. It is a precise way to create a copy, but... it's not something that inspires anything."

Ves quietly nodded. He agreed with those words. The cup lacked a personal touch that his products lacked.

"It's a product that does the job and doesn't have to accomplish anything else. There is no need to go out of our way to craft a handmade mug when our tech makes it much more convenient to print it out of a template."

"That is also a good point, Mr. Larkinson. What about you, Miss Stameross?"

The Penitent Sister shrugged. "I agree with my patriarch. We are strong because we can surround ourselves with many useful products. If we try to handcraft each of them, then too much of our population will be stuck with performing menial jobs that can easily be automated."

"And you, Miss Ketis?"

"There is great value in a sword or any other stuff that is made with love and an attention to detail." The swordmaster replied. "It's not what most humans want, though. They just want the best possible things at the cheapest possible prices. Oh, and they don't want any flaws or deviations either."

Willix nodded in approval. "These are all valid points. It is true that our civilization and many other ones have pursued greater efficiency and greater consistency. The materialization technology that is responsible for making this cup in my hand can be considered as the apex of this school of thought. There is no conceivably better way to produce items en masse with the best possible adherence to existing designs while maintaining near-complete consistency."

Ves frowned and so did the others. There was a very big flaw with this tech.

"It doesn't produce anything greater, though." He said. "The lack of... personal attention leads to an inability to create masterworks like the Amaranto. It also divorces mech designers from the practical side of mech design."

Master Willix took another sip of coffee. "Let me share with you a theory. Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship is a hierarchical model that suggests that the concept of craftsmanship has multiple layers. The most basic version of this theory claims that these layers or tiers can be stacked on top of each other like the rungs of a ladder. Now, how far up is the method of producing this cup?"

No one really knew, so the Master answered the question herself.

"It is the first rung."

What?! That was barely above ground level!

"It is easy for you to become impressed with what our production technology can do." She said. "Yet those who ascribe to the ladder theory do not consider it to be a fundamental improvement or evolution from more primitive production methods such as refining ores into steel or throwing random ingredients into a big pot to make soup."

In order to illustrate this point, she waved her arm to the side.

Within seconds, a huge space lit up as a gigantic object was being materialized into existence!

The mech in question took less than a minute to reach completion, but already the Larkinson mech designers recognized the design of the machine.

It was a nearly identical copy of the Amaranto design!

Yet... compared to the copy that Ves and his peers created by hand, the copy produced through the fastest, most consistent and most efficient method mastered by the MTA was... hollow.

Part of it was technical. Ves could clearly see from the makeup of the luminar crystal rifle that the materializer had trouble reproducing its more esoteric aspects.

Another part of it was the lack of a human touch that so wonderfully characterized the real Amaranto.

Master Willix's expression turned grim. "If our best production tech cannot yield a better version than this copy, then it does not deserve to be placed at a higher rung of the ladder."

What she essentially implied was that Ves and his people were capable of making far better mechs in their shabby second-class workshop than a mecher pressing a button on a first-class materializer!

*Chapter 3174: The True Role of Masterworks*

Ves grew a bit sceptical about this ladder theory. Though Master Willix made a compelling point, materialization technology had its own merits.

"As some of us have stated earlier, not every mech or product has to be made with personal attention. Sometimes, you just want something that works and don't want to deal with all of the hassle that comes with handmade products. The Amaranto we fabricated turned out to be great, but it could have easily ended up in a disaster if we were in a bad mood or something."

More labor-intensive production methods were always associated with greater variance. The chance of creating a masterwork was small, but the risk of botching the process was significantly greater!

"The odds of creating a masterwork is virtually zero for the vast majority of people in our society." She said. "Many believe it is not worth the effort to focus on it when quantity can easily trump quality. Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship is not universally accepted within our Association. One of the great differences between us and the Common Fleet Alliance is that the latter completely believes in mass production, mass standardization and maximum efficiency at every possible level."

That... sounded just like the fleeters.

"I can't argue with that." Ves shrugged. "The CFA has to build and maintain hundreds of thousands of huge and extremely demanding battleships and who knows how many more sub-capital ships. It is a logistical nightmare to produce all of them with more labor-intensive methods. The number of accidents, screw ups and deviations that can occur during production will certainly lead to vessels with so little integrity that they will be plagued with flaws from the moment they slide out of the shipyards!"

Gloriana added her own remark. "It's also impossible to create a masterwork version of a battleship under such circumstances. We managed to luck out because all four of us were in a good mood when we made the Amaranto, but I don't believe it is realistic for a crew of thousands, tens of thousands or even more workers to get inspired at the same time for several continuous months or years."

Battleships were so big and immense that making them like how the Larkinsons made their first production copies of their mech designs was physically impossible and unfeasible!

Master Willix smiled at Gloriana. "That is an excellent observation, Madame Wodin. Bigger is not always better. The smaller the product, the less materials are used up to make it. The galaxy may be filled with exotics but the supply of them is not endless. Material constraints are one of the main reasons why our friends over at the Common Fleet Alliance have not maintained a high rate of production of their battleships. They are not able to source the large quantities of high-grade exotics that are required to produce huge modules such as the interdiction modules and main cannon turrets that you have witnessed earlier. Think of how much less materials we have to consume if we can accomplish the same function in a mech-sized package."

There was a considerable complication to this argument, though.

Ves crossed his arms. "Miniaturized components may use up less tons of raw materials, but the quality of what is left has to be a lot higher to make all of those fancy first-class multipurpose mechs."

"You are not wrong, Mr. Larkinson, but what is the purpose of our profession?"

"We serve mech pilots." He responded with the standard MTA-approved answer.

"And how do we perform this objective?"

"We... design mechs that aim to do more with the budget, tech, materials and other means we have on hand."

Master Willix finally nodded at him. "Good mech designers can make use of the same resources to create superior works compared to those that are not as skilled. This is the central premise of our approach to mech design. While the engineers and shipwrights of the CFA also aim to minimize waste, that is difficult to accomplish when their warships keep expanding in size. The fleeters are hungry for power, and that is pressuring them to commit to the most efficient production approaches that enable them to construct immense battleships."

"Don't we also do this to a large degree?" Ves asked. "I mean, to most people, mechs are just mechs. They just need to work for them. While it would be nice to deliver more, the cost and effort required to gain an improvement is too excessive."

"It depends on the need." Master Willix agreed. "For ordinary mechs sold to customers looking for bargains, the rationale to make a great effort is not that strong. Yet what about the people you care about such as your clansmen? What about exceptional individuals such as your expert pilots? Are they not worthy of greater craftsmanship?"

Ves immediately nodded. "The costs aren't so great as long as better and more powerful mechs will help them achieve success and stay alive."

"Every mech pilot deserves to be treated like a king. That is the purest interpretation of our creed and a goal that some mech designers aim to realize. The ultimate ambition is to elevate craftsmanship to such a level that every mech pilot has access to a masterwork mech."

The four Larkinson mech designers all looked astonished. They already knew that the MTA had great ambitions, but to create a condition where an endless amount of mech pilots had access to an endless amount of masterwork mechs was so ludicrous that they couldn't even begin to point out all of the challenges that had to be overcome!

The silence that stretched on grew a little awkward, so Ves attempted to voice his own opinion.

"The biggest constraint to the CFA's build big approach is that it is limited by material scarcity. The biggest constraint to this ambition is the huge shortage of masterwork mech designers. I know from personal experience that it is incredibly difficult for anyone to succeed even once. Only the most accomplished mech designers can pump out masterworks at a more stable and frequent pace, but they can't spend all of their time in their workshops."

"Indeed. In fact, the less time they spend on designing new mechs or researching related technologies, the less they are able to succeed. At our core, we design mechs. Making them is a secondary purpose that should only be reserved for special occasions."

Gloriana looked intrigued. "I think... it would be great if it was easier for professional fabricators to make masterworks. That would solve our manpower problem and leave this job to specialists."

"That is one area of research that we are engaged in, but centuries of studies have borne little fruit so far." Master Willix said. "The shortage in skilled manpower is not a problem that can be solved in the short term. Nevertheless, our Association will never cease exploring. This is also one of the reasons why we show great interest in studying masterworks, particularly those made by younger and... less qualified professionals. The more data we gather, the more we can detect and analyse patterns."

Ves blinked. This explanation sounded counter-intuitive at first. Shouldn't the MTA value masterworks made by Masters and Star Designers more?

Then again, the MTA's research was obviously oriented towards enabling common people to make masterworks. Journeymen who were young were much closer to the average space peasant than some elite MTA Master!

Gloriana and the rest also looked enlightened. They finally understood a portion of the greater context behind the MTA's obsession for masterworks.

Was it realistic for them to attain this absurd-sounding goal? Hell no! Yet Ves blessed them on their impossible venture anyway. At least the MTA wasn't focusing all of their resources on conquering human space in its entirety!

There was just one little gap in the story that Ves was missing.

"Master, if I may ask, what is the point of all of this?" He asked. "I mean, sure, masterwork mechs are better than ordinary products, but... is it really necessary?"

The MTA Master tapped her finger against the metal table.

"There are many reasons why enabling the creation of more Masterworks is desirable. I cannot share all of them with you, but as an extra reward for your impressive feat of craftsmanship, I am allowed to reveal the most relevant implication to the four of you. It goes without saying that you should not divulge this information further."

This sounded big. Ves and everyone raised their attention and awaited the revelation.

"Masterwork mechs... increase the probability of pilots breaking through. I am not talking about a mild increase, but orders of magnitude greater. The difference is minimal at the ordinary level. This is why the public has not been able to perceive the difference. The real difference starts at the expert mech level. The amount of variables that increases the chances of a breakthrough from expert pilot to ace pilot are too many to count, so I can not exactly tell you a precise figure. Loosely speaking, the chances increase by as much as 1000 percent."

If all of the earlier revelations haven't floored the Larkinson mech designers already, then this bombshell pretty much blew them into pieces!

Only Ketis of all people looked slightly less shocked. "A good swordmaster requires a good sword."

Master Willix nodded in acknowledgement. "Aptly said. A different way to put it is that a low-quality weapon cannot accommodate the needs of a high-quality soldier. The greater the disparity between the two, the more the weaker partner of this relationship drags down the stronger partner. In order to further develop the potential of a superhuman, he or she must be matched with a superweapon, a product that has exceeded the conceptual limits of its kind. We call that a masterwork."

A deep silence followed as everyone contemplated the massive implications of these assertions. Though there was a chance that the information provided by Master Willix was wrong or inaccurate, he knew in his heart that it should be true.

It made too much sense!

The logic behind these assertions were sound. Just as Ketis had said, a good swordsman needed better swords as they grew stronger and more skilled.

While there was nothing wrong with letting a powerful swordmaster like Ketis wield a butter knife against armored infantrymen, she could do a much better job if she wielded a more impressive weapon like her Bloodsinger!

This theory explained why Venerable Tusa but especially Venerable Stark experienced so much growth after obtaining their expert mechs.

In fact, Venerable Stark already grew by a significant margin after piloting the Amaranto just once!

Ves narrowed his eyes as another thought came to mind.

Was Patriarch Reginald Cross hoping to achieve a breakthrough to ace pilot by obtaining a masterwork expert mech of his own?

What did he feel when he saw the Amaranto for the first time?

The Bolvar Rage was a potent high-tier expert mech, but in terms of craftsmanship it did not stand out too much. All Ves could say about Patriarch Reginald's expert mech was that its mech designers did their jobs.

"I have a question, ma'am." Gloriana softly asked. "Do expert pilots benefit from piloting well-crafted expert mechs even if they fall short of masterwork level?"

"They most certainly do, Madame Wodin. The better the weapon, the less it will hinder a strong soldier's progression. What you must take note though is that an expert mech that remains on the first rung or level of craftsmanship can only provide a limited amount of assistance to the development of an expert pilot. The ladder is called that way because there is a strong and clear difference between the first rung and second rung. Masterwork expert mechs truly stand at a much taller height."

Ves turned his head and glanced at the materialized version of the Amaranto. Compared to the version that was the culmination of all of the Design Department's hard work in the last few months, the hollow copy in front of him was completely devoid of any element that only masterwork products possessed.

It was a product, not a partner.

*Chapter 3175: Philosophical Difference*

"Humanity is a tool-using race." Master Willix spoke up again after the four Journeymen had time to process the massive revelations. "Our race and civilization progresses by making use of more and better tools. Technology is our crucial enabler and our

dependence on it has grown exponentially greater as we have developed further along this trajectory. Think about what would happen if all technology from the simplest room light to our innumerable amount of starships stop working overnight. What do you think would happen to our civilization?"

The answer to that was quite simple.

"It would be doomsday for us." Ketis said. "I mean, if this battleship and every tech inside her falls apart, the vessel would violently eject out of FTL which we may or may not survive. If we are lucky enough to still be alive and not lost in some weird or random higher dimension, we would slowly freeze and suffocate as the temperature drops and the oxygen level around us drops while we continue to breathe out carbon dioxide. What's funny is that we'd be better off than most people stranded on dead starships since the Hessarian Bardine is quite big. The more packed passenger liners would probably turn into floating coffins the fastest while the tiny crews of cargo haulers might be able to last for years if their cargo holds are air-pressurized."

"Life on a planet won't be much better." Gloriana remarked. "Transportation and many services will collapse overnight. People who live in densely-populated cities will quickly go through their stock of perishable food products and will have to subsist on whatever stashes of emergency rations that they or the local government has stockpiled. The sheer amount of hungry mouths will ensure that these reserves will never last long enough for a group of urbanized and completely clueless humans to figure out how to start up enough farms to feed the desperate population."

These were some of the few issues that would plague humanity after losing access to their tech. They didn't even begin to address other issues such as hostile alien empires overrunning defenseless human territories, the breakdown of order after the powers that be lost all of their tools of coercion and so on. Only the most isolated and most self-sufficient territories in the backwaters of human space had a realistic chance of survival.

Ves could easily imagine that remote planets like Cloudy Curtain would continue to subsist even if there were no machines anymore to assist in tending to all of its farms.

In contrast, hyper advanced star systems that were stuffed with high technology such as Centerpoint would turn into an immediate catastrophe as all of those huge and heavy floating structures collapsed to the ground and how the lack of radiation shielding and other forms of protection would cook and irradiate the entire population to death long before they ran out of emergency rations!

Master Willix saw that she had made her point. "Do you see what we have become? We as a race have decided that our best way to progress is to increase our development on tools and to become more dependent on them. Now, we at the MTA do not frown upon this. Compared to many other sentient alien races, we are individually weak and have very limited potential for transformational growth. Our dependence on better and better

tools allow us to grow far past our biological limitations and become the dominant species in this galaxy and the next."

Ves could hear a 'but' coming...

"Not everyone believes we are following the right path." The Master gravely said. "There are great philosophical debates on the course we are charting and whether it is still the best choice for us to follow the historical trend. This is in fact another great difference between our Association and the CFA. Can you guess what I am talking about?"

The Journeymen took a moment to think about this question. Fortunately, Ves spent a fair bit of time on thinking about these issues himself. His overactive imagination always caused him to think about fanciful subjects even if they didn't have any direct bearing on his current life.

"I would say that the CFA attempts to reform the past while the MTA attempts to chart a different future." He spoke up. "Warships have always been our strongest weapons and even now they guarantee our dominance over the galaxy. The CFA may have some thoughts about who is allowed to control all of these powerful vessels, but it still embraces them and wishes to develop them even further. As for your Association, you have already stated that you seek to shift away from this increasingly wasteful and unsustainable paradigm. You and your fellow mech designers are looking to make our race and civilization stronger through different means."

The Master nodded. "You are correct. We do attempt to make a break from our past. Your answer falls short of the key point, though. Does anyone else have a more thorough answer in mind?"

Silence ensued as Ves and his fellow Larkinson mech designers failed to come up with an idea they were confident enough to present. It was as if they were back in class and wanted to avoid embarrassing themselves in front of their professor.

Fortunately, Master Willix did not keep them in suspense for long.

"Think about who we are, where we stand at this time and where we are heading to. We are continuing to depend more on technology, yet we have never truly utilized its true potential."

That sounded incredibly strange to Ves and the others. Humankind was incredibly powerful today because of its utilization of technology! Just the advancements in warship-related technologies was enough to break the old order that had previously governed the galaxy and push back the Seven Apex Races from their old territories!

There was no way that Master Willix was kidding, though. Ves tried to think deeper and grasp the point that she was trying to make.

He failed to connect the dots.

Willix let out a disappointed sigh. "We are growing weaker as a race."

...What?

Everyone looked confused. Were they truly growing weaker? Then why didn't they feel that way? After months of relative calm, humanity had even begun a new round of expansion by invading the Red Ocean dwarf galaxy! How could their race and civilization possibly be weak in the face of this aggressive development?

"Let me bring up a simple example." She said. "In ancient times, humans gained sustenance and more specifically meat through hunting prey. This was physical, demanding and dangerous work. The tools that ancient humans had access to consisted of stone-tipped spears and javelins. Even if they were further developed and made use of slings or bows, that still did not take away from the fact that they must physically exert themselves. The best and most successful hunters were all strong and fit and could use that to fight against any foe, not just their prey."

Ves started to see where this story was going.

"With the passage of time and the advancement of early humanity's tech, hunting has become increasingly less demanding. Spears made way for hunting bows. Hunting bows made way for muskets. Humans rely increasingly less on hunting and more on capital-intensive factory farming to bring meat to their tables. These days, the mass cultivation of genuine meat is a near-completely automated process. Bots and advanced algorithms can easily manage the entire process of raising and butchering livestock. Only the more traditional organic farms that serve a distinguished clientele bother with older methods, but even then these farm workers cannot compare to the ancient hunters in strength."

"You're saying that as our technology grows stronger, our fitness and self-sufficiency grows weaker." He said.

"That is my essential point." Willix finally looked pleased again. "As you can imagine, the CFA with its obsession for ever-greater warships and advanced automation does not ascribe to this viewpoint. The fleeters are strong traditionalists who continue to assume that it is irrelevant to the gradual weakening of individual humans."

"What does this have to do with masterworks?" Ketis asked with a touch of impatience.

These philosophical talks were not her cup of tea. If Master Willix wanted to lecture them about high-minded ideas that were barely relevant to the immediate issues, then Ketis would rather skip the boring lecture.

"I was getting to that, Miss Ketis. You see, our Association also supports technology, but we wish to chart a different course from our friends over at the CFA. We believe that technology must strengthen humans, not weaken us as is the case for most applications today."

This was a profound and incredibly high-level aspiration that none of the Larkinson mech designers felt that it mattered to them at first.

However, the dots finally connected to them after a short time.

"So that is why you insist on studying masterworks. You think it is a way to make people stronger." Gloriana realized.

"As I have stated earlier, masterwork mechs are special in that they can strengthen both their creators and users." Master Willix smiled. "Yes, you have created several masterworks already. How do you feel each time you succeed? Do you feel enlightened? Do you feel you have come closer to the essence of your profession?"

He nodded. "All of that has happened and more. I don't really know why I experience all of these changes, but they have all been helpful to me. I feel I can design a better mech each time I complete a successful masterwork. The threshold of making another masterwork also drops."

"That is because you have elevated yourself as a masterwork mech designer. You have grown stronger in a way that many other mech designers are never able to achieve. The mech pilots that have the privilege to pilot your masterworks are also fortunate. Their stronger and more exceptional mechs can unlock their potential and speed up their development."

Ves suddenly realized a critical detail. His first, true masterwork mech was the Devil Tiger. When his mother stole his proud creation and passed it on to his father, did she know about the usefulness of masterwork mechs. Did she deliberately passed it on to her husband so that she could be assured that he would be able to progress a lot easier as a mech pilot?

This was perhaps the best gift that he could have given to his father! While it was undeniable that the Devil Tiger had already changed into a drastically different mech from his original form, Ves had designed it to be adaptable and capable of growth from the start. Its essential character and masterwork properties should still be intact even if a second mech designer upgraded it into an expert mech.

As long as the Devil Tiger continued to upgrade, his father might even be able to break through to ace pilot one day! Unlike his brother Ark, Ryncol may actually be the first son of Benjamin Larkinson to reach a height that no other Larkinson mech pilot had ever reached in the history of their lineage!

While Ves mused about the optimistic future of his father, Master Willix continued to expand on her point.

"The CFA's ideal of a strong human is someone who relies on smarts and knowledge to manipulate advanced machines. There is a strict separation between man and machine, and it is only the latter that becomes stronger and more advanced."

"What about the MTA?"

"Our ideal is one of mutual strengthening and mutual dependence." Master Willix looked a bit more proud. "By elevating the quality of our mechs, we can create machines that are stronger but do not leave their human creators and users behind. At this time, we already know it is possible for this to happen. It is unfortunate that our circumstances raise the bar too high. In order for us to succeed in proving the CFA wrong, we must continue to work towards this goal and find a solution that will allow every mech designer or craftsman to make a masterwork... When we are able to realize this future, humanity will have truly stepped on the second rung of the ladder."

#### *Chapter 3176: Higher Rungs*

Ves wished the MTA the best of success in realizing this utopian future. As a powerful organization, it could afford to chase after an impossible dream. He wasn't holding out hope, however. The challenges to creating a masterwork was so immense that it was too difficult to make them more accessible. Most people simply weren't good enough to touch this level of craftsmanship.

What he did find interesting was that he learned a bit more about the division between the CFA and MTA. Many of the differences that Ves already knew such as the preferences between mechs and warships were basic disagreements that everyone in the galaxy took for granted these days.

Few ever took the trouble to think deeper and figure out why exactly they committed to mechs or warships. Simple arguments such as 'don't fix what ain't broke' and 'mechs produce less collateral damage' were shallow answers that did not fundamentally explain the driving motivation behind these differences.

Ves finally received an actual answer now. He and his fellow mech designers understood the purpose of the MTA and CFA a bit better now that Master Willix explained what masterworks were really about and why that was one of the basic factors that separated the Big Two.

Still, the odds were stacked against the MTA. The stodgy CFA was less inclined to embrace all of this nonsense and continued to stick with humanity's tried and true approach that had already worked for millenia. Change was a lot more difficult to accomplish in times of prosperity. So far, no one had seen any proof that the current approach was flawed and wouldn't work any longer.

What he and his fellow Larkinsons currently cared about was learning more about masterworks so that they could utilize their benefits to the fullest!

"Master Willix." Ves politely asked. "Earlier, you spoke about how a masterwork expert like our Amaranto can increase the chances of ace pilots breaking through by more than 1000%. You also stated that masterworks of standard mechs don't make an appreciable difference in breakthrough chances. Given these observations, what are the chances of ace pilots breaking through to the rank of god pilot?"

Normally, he would never dare to ask such a profound and high-level question. Anything related to ace pilots and god pilots was so far above his head that he shouldn't even be thinking about them. He was too curious, though, and he recognized that this was a rare and precious opportunity to get some actual answers on what the upper end of mech design was about.

Master Willix paused for a moment. "Ace pilots are powerful human beings who distort and defy reality merely by existing. They belong to a higher tier of warriors who have worked hard and endured many risks to prove themselves worthy of their superhuman capabilities. Once an expert pilot makes the transition to ace pilot, a new world opens up. Ace mechs designed specifically with ace pilots in mind can allow them to exert vastly more power on the battlefield. However, the chasm between ace pilots is the widest that we know of. Ace pilots must overcome so many hurdles and work so hard to improve that our Association has concluded that it is impossible for them to make the ultimate step through their own strength."

"Does that mean... that every god pilot in existence today managed to break through by piloting a masterwork ace mech?" Ves curiously asked.

"Not entirely." Willix admitted. "There are... special cases that I shall not discuss. In general, ace pilots will never be able to make any appreciable progress in moving beyond their current limitations if their mechs are still situated on the first rung of the ladder. They must have access to an ace mech that is at least on the second rung of the ladder to possess a slight chance of being able to overcome their remaining limitations and survive the metamorphosis that every mech pilot dreams of achieving."

This was another massive revelation! Though it wasn't as relevant to Ves and his young clan right now, the value of this information would become priceless later on. Now that they knew one of the essential prerequisites to allowing ace pilots to progress further, they could specifically work towards improving this aspect further!

"How big are their chances, exactly?" Ves followed up with another question. "From the way that you have phrased your words, it sounds as if a masterwork ace mech is not quite sufficient."

"That is indeed the case." Master Willix said. As I have mentioned earlier, a human and a tool must be within a certain range of strength to foster greater strength. The second

rung of ladder, namely masterworks, corresponds well with expert pilots, but the equation is different for ace pilots. While piloting a masterwork ace mech is better than piloting a perfunctory ace mech, it is ultimately not a good match."

Ves, Gloriana, Juliet and Ketis all widened their eyes as they realized the unspoken but obvious implication of this statement.

"Is there... a third rung of ladder?"

Master Willix responded with a smirk. "There is. This is a supremely high level of craftsmanship. None of you are close to attaining it, so do not even think about aiming for it. You have only touched upon the second rung of the latter for now. Pull yourself up first before you think about touching the third rung of the ladder."

Gloriana couldn't hold in her curiosity, though. "What kind of mech designer is qualified to design a mech that meets the standards of the third rung of the ladder?!"

The Master Mech Designer slowly let out a breath. "This is currently the exclusive domain of Star Designers. Only they are qualified to create grand works that far exceed the properties of masterwork mechs."

"A... grand work?"

"Yes. That is what we currently call any mech or work that has reached a level of quality that you can only dream about in your current stage. The word 'grand' is colloquially used to describe great and ambitious endeavors, and in a way that also describes the mechs that can truly allow ace pilots to make the ultimate transformation and become a new form of existence. As for god pilots... their situation is special."

"How so?"

Master Willix did not immediately reply. It was as if she was contemplating whether she should throw the curious and eager Larkinsons another bone.

At some point, she decided that it wouldn't hurt to broaden their horizons more.

"Do you remember when I said that humanity is a tool-using race? Our current paradigm with regards to this truth is that we humans are discreet from tools. When mech pilots step into the cockpit of a mech, they become one only in a symbolic manner. The separation between human and machine remains firmly in place. The only deviation occurs when the neural interface establishes a small line through the wall that separates the two. This connects the two sides together and allows them to cooperate to a limited degree."

This all sounded normal to the Larkinsons, but then Master Willix presented a different model.

"Now what do you think will happen if we reduce the separation between man and machine? What if we blur the lines and integrate mech pilots with their mechs to a deeper and more fundamental degree?"

"This..."

What the hell was Master Willix talking about? This sounded like a sick experiment!

The last instance where Ves saw an example of a human merging with a mech was Uranus, and that ended up very badly for the Supreme Sage and the millions of innocent victims that had fallen victim to the uncontrollable biojuggernaut's rampage!

"Though we seek to strengthen humans, we never dismiss the value and utility of tools." Master Willix nonchalantly continued as if there was nothing wrong with what she said. "The use of tools is not wrong as long as it is used to strengthen the human. With higher qualities of mechs, it becomes more and more possible to blur the lines between the two. The degree of fusion between god pilots and god mechs is an exceptional marvel to behold. God pilots can never lose their god mechs because he has become it in a sense."

Ves and the others had practically grown numb with all of the shocking secrets they learned. They never knew that there were so many shocking secrets behind masterwork mechs!

The fog obscuring the top had cleared up a lot, allowing the young Journeymen to see what they were working towards with their successive masterwork successes.

The jump from masterwork to grand work was evidently an immense leap in quality. If only Star Designers were able to create grand works, then it was no wonder why they were so highly revered in human space!

Ves finally understood the full significance of a 'grand design'. It was not just a description of a high-quality work, but was an actual quality standard that only the top of human society were able to handle!

He decided to ask one more question. "Since there is a third rung, is there a fourth rung?"

Master Willix maintained her current smile. "Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship currently defines four different rungs. I have already described three of them. We know they exist because we can make products that equate to each quality standard. As for the fourth rung... currently it is only inferred. It is said that the successful creation of a mech will shake the galaxy and start an entirely new epoch."

She didn't say anything further about this topic. Her audience already received plenty of information for them to digest for many years.

Eventually, Master Willix turned the discussion to a more relevant direction.

"Let us proceed to business. My colleagues have just completed their examination of the Amaranto. It shall be teleported back to your flagship in a short time."

Ves truly felt assured now that Master Willix said that the MTA wasn't keeping his latest masterwork mech. The powerful creation was paired with Venerable Stark, so it would never be able to fulfill the function it was made for if it was taken away.

Besides, the MTA had a strong interest in seeing Ves and his co-workers develop even more masterwork mechs. Master Willix and the other mechers couldn't treat their guests as dismissively as they did to other space peasants.

Ves had finally gained some actual leverage. Though the relationship between him and the MTA was still heavily skewed, the latter had to be a lot careful about dictating terms to him. This was definite progress in his eyes!

"First, the merits." The Master spoke. "The value of a masterwork expert mech is much greater than you realize. However, the design is not completely yours. I as well as Mr. S. has improved its parameters well beyond what you are capable of. We have therefore decided that we will grant your team a total of 5 million MTA merits, split equally between each of you regardless of your actual contributions."

5 million MTA merits.

Receiving such a sum should have been a celebration to the Larkinsons. Yet with all of the interest surrounding a masterwork expert mech built by a bunch of Journeymen, wasn't this too paltry?!

Willix raised her palm before Ves could open his mouth. "Now, before you complain, the main reason why you will only receive 5 million MTA merits in total is because we have already granted you even greater rewards."

"What greater rewards?"

"We decided to elevate you from the 12th tier of galactic citizenship to the 10th tier of galactic citizenship. This is a great leap that puts you on the same level as a common citizen of a first-rate state."

This... did not sound very impressive to Ves... He and his colleagues all looked confused. Was it really so impressive to jump from the lowest tier of galactic citizenship to something that was barely better? What difference did it make in practical terms? Ves seriously doubted whether anyone would take his elevated citizenship seriously when he was nowhere near the power level of a first-class mech designer!

### *Chapter 3177: Extra Favors*

Up until this point, Ves perceived no appreciable benefits from becoming a 12th tier galactic citizen. Every Journeyman Mech Designer who recently broke through was eligible to become one when they made their pilgrimages to one of the sector headquarters of the MTA.

Though the mechers over there spoke about how noble and important it was for them to be recognized as proper citizens of the human galactic community, the situation was a lot different outside of their ivory towers.

Pirates and enemies did not pay any heed to the fact that Ves was a galactic citizen! His 12th tier citizenship did not give him more protection or granted him any meaningful rights. At most, his name was put in the huge list of people who were of some significance and couldn't be lumped in with the names of other space peasants.

A jump by two tiers might sound impressive in other circumstances, but what kind of benefits did this bring? Ves had little regard for symbolic rewards.

"The tenth tier is a true reflection of your value to human society." Master Willix said, paying special attention to Ves. "Although it is an unfortunate description of our society, the fact of the matter is that not every human is equal. There are some who can contribute more because of their higher degree of knowledge and capabilities. They are awarded with higher tiers of citizenships to reflect their relative importance and grant them greater access to the products and services that we offer. For example, one of the reasons why I have been authorized to tell you about masterworks and grand works is because you are more qualified to know about matters that we do not feel the need to divulge to lesser people."

Well, that sounded elitist as hell, but Ves understood why the mechers thought that way. There were way too many humans and the overwhelming majority of them were weak, poor and inconsequential. It was too burdensome to provide excellent treatment to them all when they did not nearly give back to society as much as first-class citizens.

According to their new tiers, Ves, Gloriana Juliet and Ketis should be able to contribute as much as first-class citizens.

Ves thought this was completely wrong. He was sure that he had already provided a lot more useful information and other benefits to the MTA than what an average Terran or Rubarthan could ever accomplish!

Just because first-class citizens were held in high regard didn't mean that all of them were geniuses. There were plenty of bums among them who completely wasted the opportunities they received in their lives and went on to screw around and leech lots of resources without ever thinking about paying back to society.

It was too bad his other colleagues didn't think this way. Gloriana looked especially proud for receiving recognition for her value.

"What kind of expanded permissions will we receive?"

"It will become more convenient for you to gain access to high technology, whether in the form of knowledge or ready-made products. You can use some of your newly-earned merits to exchange for teleportation countermeasure devices, personal teleporters or apply for permission to study neural interface technology. You can explore the full range of options in your own time." Willix waved her hand.

Ves felt a bit more mollified after he heard that. While he still needed to pay a price to obtain all of those goodies, it was already great that he had access to them as long as he had enough money or merits on hand.

If Ves ever wanted to lift himself and his clan up to first-class standards, then it was vital for him to phase in more first-class tech and knowledge over time. This was destined to be a long and gradual process because he didn't have the benefit of a spouse who was already at the height he aimed to reach.

He seriously doubted he would survive after he informed Gloriana that he was thinking about marrying a first-class princess!

Well, it was for the better. He didn't want to rely on others to uplift himself this time. His previous jump from third-class to second-class had given the Hexers plenty of ways to insert themselves in his life. This problem would become a lot worse if he repeated the same dance with Terrans or Rubarthans!

"Do we get anything else?" Ves asked. "Or is that all?"

Master Willix looked quite unimpressed at him. "Even if there are nine more tiers in front of you, the status that you have gained is hardly matched by anyone in this region of space. Only Masters and other highly-distinguished individuals from the surrounding star clusters have received this honor. Many trans-galactic organizations will provide you with much better treatment when you make use of their services. The treatment that you will receive will truly equal that of first-class citizens. Do mind that you are also expected to pay as much as them for many of the costlier and more exclusive services."

All of this sounded rather vague to Ves for the moment. He did not want to put too much hope on this reward until he actually tried to make use of it for real. Until then, he withheld his judgement.

So far, the only reward he really cared about was the 5 million MTA merit award. Though it wasn't as high as he wished, at least it was better than nothing.

"Before I return you to your ships, you are allowed to make additional requests if you wish." Maser Willix finally said. "It is up to my discretion whether we will act on it or not. This is purely a favor to the four of you. It is also a small form of compensation for the disruptions that we have caused to you, so do not ask anything excessive."

Gloriana had been waiting for this moment. She immediately pounced on the opportunity by issuing the request that had always been hanging in the back of her mind!

"Can you grant the Glory Seekers permission to make use of luminar crystal technology?!"

"Yes." Master Willix immediately nodded as if she already expected it. "However, make sure the tech does not proliferate beyond their control. If the Glory Seekers prove to be unable to handle this tech in a proper manner, then we will not hesitate to revoke this privilege."

That sounded quite harsh, but Gloriana was more than happy with what she got. By asking for permission on behalf of the entire Glory Seekers rather than just her brother, she effectively secured a huge boost in strength for the expeditionary fleet!

As long as the Glory Seekers kept traveling with the Larkinson Clan, then the two of them combined would be able to unleash much greater damage at range!

Juliet raised her hand. "Can you give us permission to arm ourselves with weapons exceeding the limits of mechs?"

"No." Willix immediately shut her down. "That goes far beyond the scope of a favor. Dial back your demands."

Well, it was worth a try. Even Ves considered making this request before he judged that there was a 999.99 chance that Willix would say no. She had already said that bigger wasn't better, so why should she make an exception and allow the Larkinson Clan to ignore the prohibition on warship-grade weapons?

"Then... can you give our clan a free trade writ in the Red Ocean?"

Ves wanted to scratch his head. What the heck was this?

It turned out that this was quite a serious favor, because Master Willix waited for almost a dozen seconds before she answered.

"Granted. We shall formally issue this writ to your clan when it reaches the Red Ocean. The writ will be in effect for ten years before it expires. Given your galactic citizenship tier, any of you can apply to extend it by another 10-year term but at a vastly inflated

rate of 100 million MTA merits. We don't like giving out free trade writs so you must convince us that you deserve an extension."

Ves almost grew sick when he heard this sum. 100 million MTA merits was enough to purchase another fleet beyonder ticket! Who the hell would be crazy enough to cough up so many precious merits only to obtain this so-called writ that only made trade more convenient or something?

This was definitely a scam!

As Ves kept wondering what this writ was about and why Juliet of all people had heard of it, Ketis issued her request next. She reached behind her and grabbed her floating greatsword that was currently resting in its scabbard.

"Can I make use of your facilities and stock of materials to upgrade and personalize my sword?"

Willix responded with a curt nod. "I can only give you three hours. After that, the Hesserian Bardine must leave."

"Then please allow me to start straight away!"

Willix waved her hand, causing Ketis and Bloodsinger to teleport away from the workshop. She then turned to Ves. "What about you, Mr. Larkinson?"

This was such an open-ended opportunity that Ves didn't know where to begin. Even if he couldn't be too excessive, there was still a huge amount of options he could choose from. What if he asked too little? He would probably regret the missed opportunity for the rest of his life!

He did not rush his decision. So far, he already determined that he should skip any benefits that he could easily obtain by paying money or exchanging MTA merits.

He could get his hands on material objects one way or another by himself. As for knowledge, while he was greedy to learn more about high technology, he already had access to the System.

Therefore, anything which he could obtain through alternative channels was a bad choice.

A much better use of this reward was to ask for something that people ordinarily couldn't ask from the MTA. Gloriana's request was a good example of that.

When Ves thought in the direction of rules, he began to narrow down his choices.

"Can you give me permission to sell my mechs to consumers through the MTA's trading platform for merits?"

Willix's answer was firm. "No. Merits are non-transferable and should not be earned through barter. This is a long-standing principle that cannot be changed."

Ves had the idea that this wasn't entirely the case, but obviously he wasn't valued enough for her to grant an exemption.

He tried to figure out another option.

"What if... you give us protection while we're in the Red Ocean? I mean, you want us to make more masterwork mechs, right? We can't do that if we're dead. Can you give us a pass or something that will warn everyone else that they will immediately invite retribution from you if they attack our fleet?"

This was a more interesting request to Master Willix. However, she was limited by how much she could do in her position.

"We have had bad experiences with providing official protection to private individuals and organizations. The rules surrounding them have been tightened and we generally do not do this anymore." She stated. "In light of the chaotic situation in the Red Ocean, we are prepared to give you a limited amount of cover. We will not extend protection to your entire clan, but it is much less problematic to extend it to just the four of you. For a duration of 2 years after you enter the Red Ocean, anyone who directly attacks you, restricts you and so on will invite the heaviest punishment from our Association."

This... was much less than Ves hoped. Not only did it only cover four of them, it also expired in just 24 months!

Still, Ves shouldn't complain too much. The MTA was quite stingy about these matters so this was already a considerable concession.

"Thank you. I will be sure to take that all into account."

"Good. Then this meeting has come to an end. I wish you good luck in your future endeavors and do not hesitate to inform us if you have made any breakthroughs regarding interesting tech, original new methods and developing more masterwork mechs... We must do our best to shift humanity's relationship with technology in order to prevent us from becoming slaves to our tools."

*Chapter 3178: Ketis' Sharp and Long Blade*

Three hours later, Ves and his colleagues returned to the Spirit of Bentheim. They arrived with much fanfare as the Larkinsons were worried sick about them. Suspicious of being replaced by clones or well-trained spies who underwent a complete makeover,

the guards firmly insisted on marching them to the medical bay in order to inspect that everything was in order.

This was just an extreme precaution, as some things couldn't be faked. Ves, Gloriana and Ketis all exuded strong and unique demeanors that every extraordinary being possessed. Juliet was a bit more low-key but any Penitent Sister would be able to recognize their own kind.

Most importantly, the Larkinson Network fully recognized them as authentic Larkinsons. This was the most definite test of all, so the ship no longer maintained its heightened alert status.

For this reason, the extensive medical examination focused more on trying to identify any hidden tampering. From changing the chemical balance of the brain to installing a secret microscopic listening device in someone's hip bone, there were an endless amount of ways to mess with people without ever letting them know.

The doctors didn't find anything unusual, not that they expected to in the first place. If the MTA actually did something, then there was no way a bunch of second-raters would be able to find anything with their current tech level.

"I don't think anything has happened." Ves said as he swept his entire body with his spiritual senses. "Nothing is amiss or misplaced. I feel completely like myself."

"Miaow." Clixie concurred as she circled around Ves' ankles and sniffed his body.

Though they still had to undergo more extensive checkups later, for all intents and purposes everything was back in order.

When Ves gathered the three Journeymen together in an office in order to discuss what happened, he received a surprising announcement from Ketis.

"You did what?!"

"I bought a PP for myself." Ketis calmly stated to Ves. "When I first heard about them, I always wanted to obtain one myself. I want to give back to the Heavensword Association for guiding me to the true path of swordsmanship, but I can't do that if I am moving away from Majestic Teal. Now that I earned the merits for it, I decided to spend 1 million on a new PP so that I can thrust it in the middle of the Yeina Star Cluster while the costs are still reasonable. I would have to exchange a lot more merits if I want to do the same thing when I'm already in the Red Ocean as it costs a fortune to transport it back."

Ves didn't know how he should feel about this. He considered her merits to belong to the Larkinson Clan's collective pot as she only played a marginal role in the creation of their latest masterwork.

Nonetheless, the merits were deposited in her account and it would worsen his relationship with her if he demanded her to spend it on another cause, such as helping the Golden Skull Alliance obtain a fleet beyonder ticket.

"Very well." He sighed. "If this is what you want, then it's alright. It's just a million MTA merits anyway. We've got more left to spare as they seem to rain down on us lately."

The merits he obtained from teaching the MTA how to make enhanced luminar crystals and making a masterwork expert mech completely alleviated his MTA merit shortage. With one more mission in progress, Ves was completely confident that the Larkinson Clan and its allies could afford to exchange a fleet beyonder ticket by themselves.

"Hey, I'll do my best to contribute as much as I can in our subsequent projects." Ketis promised. "The Decapitator Project is doing well and after the Amaranto I have a lot of new ideas that can make it better. I will also do my best to strengthen the Vanguard Project and the Chimera Project as much as possible."

Ves waved his hand. "I expect the best from you regardless of any conditions. As mech designers, it is natural to have favorites and to be more passionate towards certain projects, but don't neglect those that fall outside of your interest. We are professionals. If you don't like a project, then make that clear from the start. Once you are onboard, you must always endeavor to do your best until you finish the job. This is what it means to be a service provider."

Ketis rolled her eyes. "I already understand. You don't need to remind me. By the way, do you want to see what I did with my sword?!"

"I do."

"Look."

When Ketis grabbed Bloodsinger and unsheathed it from its new and more robust-looking scabbard, a slightly slimmer but still heavy and substantial blade entered into view.

The weapon exuded the sharp and distinct presence of Sharpie, lending the weapon a magnified sense of threat. Ves did not even dare to reach out with his hand to touch the flat side of the smooth and polished surface.

Though Bloodsinger did not appear to have changed all that much compared to before, Ves was able to detect many different changes that made the weapon more sleek and streamlined. tweaks. The original CFA greatsword that Ketis obtained from the Starlight Megalodon was already an excellent weapon, but it had become a lot heavier and more unwieldy after he and Ketis covered it with a thin but crucial layer of Unending alloy. This allowed them to turn Bloodsinger into a prime weapon that paired well with Sharpie.

From what it looked like, Ketis retained the Unending alloy but pared back the materials that made up the original blade. He could see that Ketis also changed the hilt in certain ways. It looked a lot stronger and more specific as the swordmaster made use of the stock of quality materials the MTA had on hand to accomplish a better fit with her hand size, arm strength and preferred fighting style.

"I see you also ripped out every remaining electronic module from this weapon." He said.

"I don't need all of those functions." She nodded. "Sharpie and I can take care of the rest. Bloodsinger just needs to be a solid, timeless sword that I can rely on in any circumstance no matter what is going on. Electronics can fail or become compromised, but a naked blade made out of good-quality materials is always reliable."

He could see that Ketis truly poured her heart and passion into reforging the Bloodsinger.

She took a lot of cues from Gloriana and focused a lot more on fit and made sure that each gram of metal served a useful purpose.

At the same time, she also made sure to imprint her own identity and swordsmanship into the weapon as she reshaped it so that it belonged to her even more. He could sense how the weapon had become a bit more alive. By taking so much care of her weapon, it had become even more integrated to her. Over time, Bloodsinger would continue to bloom like his living mechs, especially now that Ketis added extra personal touches to the weapon.

"Did you attempt to create a masterwork out of it after hearing Master Willix's lecture?" Ves asked as he looked up at his student.

She let out a sigh. "I did my best, but... I still fell short. I didn't have enough time and I wasn't familiar with all of the advanced tools and materials that the Hesserian Bardine's manual workshop had to offer. If I could just spend a week planning out a design based on all of the resources I had at my disposal, I could have done a better job."

Ves reached out and patted her firm shoulder. "Those tools and resources aren't yours. For jobs like these, it's better to rely on the stuff you earned yourself. If you're not ready, then you're not ready. As someone who has made a few masterworks myself, you can never make one when you are underprepared and in a rush. Also, don't think that you are a failure if you haven't been able to meet your goal. My wife and I tried several times and didn't achieve any success for a relatively long time."

It was a long time to the couple but an extremely short time to a normal mech designer! A lot of mech designers would beat Ves in the face if they heard that he was complaining about not being able to make another masterwork after just one or two rounds of mech design projects!

Ketis was a strong-minded woman, so she did not take the failure too badly. She sheathed Bloodsinger back into its floating scabbard and allowed it to fly freely.

"I never imagined that I would strongly agree with the MTA on anything, but I am fascinated with this so-called Ladder of Craftsmanship theory. I've heard much about legendary swords back when I was in the Heavensword Association. I think the Heavensword itself ought to be a masterwork. There are tales how every successive Heavensword Saint that gets to wield the weapon is able to break through to sword saint."

Part of that was undoubtedly due to the fact that the state selected the most talented and qualified swordmasters to assume the highest office. The new people in charge already possessed a high chance of advancing once again. Once they got to wield the legendary Heavensword which was a weapon of a quality beyond compare, their talent and capabilities were no longer constricted by their inferior weapons, allowing them to take a powerful leap forward!

In fact, considering the exaggerated stories surrounding the Heavensword, it shouldn't be a normal masterwork. It was either a blade with a lot of unusual properties or it might be a grand work!

Ves inwardly shook his head. It was too soon for him to think about making grand works when he was so far away from consistently producing masterworks. He needed to learn how to walk before he could run.

"It's nice to know about how we can refine our craftsmanship, but don't get too obsessed about it. Don't think the end results are worthless when you have fallen short of your goal. A product is always useful even if it only reaches the first rung of the ladder. What I don't like about the Ladder of Craftsmanship is how it degrades everything that sits at the bottom. There are so many things around us that are considered trash in this model, but I don't think that simple products are bad at all. As long as they do their jobs within reason, they are still fine. The same goes for your sword. A better-quality blade might serve you better, but your current one can cut someone apart almost just as well."

Ves did not completely buy into Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship. No matter how well it described the phenomena of masterworks and grand works, it was just an attempt to describe reality from a human perspective. Who knew what this Senfovon guy had overlooked when he initially proposed this theoretical model.

After talking a bit more with Ketis, they eventually separated and went their separate ways. With everything that had happened today, they were in no condition to head to the design lab and start another routine design session.

"I need to gather my team and figure out how to go from here." Ves muttered.

The MTA made a big movement and he was sure that he had become a definite person of interest to the organization as a whole. It was no longer just Master Willix and her faction that had eyes on him and his capabilities.

The only reason why the Association did not press any further was because they mistakenly thought that Mr. S. already laid claim on Ves. If the mechers thought that this mysterious person was merely a Master, then that wouldn't have been a big deal, but now that they had 'proof' that they were likely dealing with an elite and exalted Star Designer, then that was a different story!

Ves was glad that it all worked out for him somehow, but he was not happy with his precarious situation. Only he knew that Mr. S. was a complete fabrication and that the MTA were basically making fools of themselves by believing in his existence.

"Perhaps... I should go on another 'vacation' when my current round of projects is done..."

*Chapter 3179: Free Trade Writ*

"So what the hell is an MTA trade writ?"

When Ves returned to his official office, he leaned back in his chair and lifted his shoes to his desk top. He felt awfully stiff after staying aboard an MTA battleship for several hours knowing that he was under a lot of scrutiny.

Now that he returned to his own ship, he immediately felt at home and wanted to do nothing more than to relax for the rest of the day.

He had a lot of questions, though. A lot had happened during his surprising visit and he needed to get to the bottom of them quickly in order to make sure his clan would do well once it reached the Red Ocean.

To do that, he called Shederin Purnesse first in order to get some answers.

The foreign affairs ministers of the Larkinson Clan looked surprised. "The Mech Trade Association actually extended a free trade writ to us, sir? Is it a permanent writ?"

"It's not a permanent one. Master Willix seemed quite reluctant to extend it to us, so we can only enjoy it for a single decade before it expires." Ves explained. "Juliet requested one for the clan for some reason. Did she do us a favor?"

"This... is a massive favor, sir!"

"It is?" Ves raised his eyebrows.

"If you have read up on the legal intricacies of operating in the Red Ocean, then you should know that the star systems under the control of the MTA or the CFA are one of the few places that are absolutely safe." Shederin began. "They function as the military bases and launching points of the Big Two's invasion of the Red Ocean. As far as I'm aware, the indigenous alien empires that occupy the dwarf galaxy have never succeeded in dislodging the Big Two out of these key star systems. They're now known as central star nodes."

"I've heard a bit about them, but how do free trade writs fall into this picture?"

"It's expensive to operate in a central star node. The MTA and CFA have heavily invested in their development, allowing them to raise its safety and infrastructure to impressive levels. This has also turned them into strong attractions, so much so that many people want to settle permanently in these paradises. That is obviously not what the Big Two has in mind, so they have implemented many measures to encourage people to go elsewhere."

"What kind of measures are we talking about?"

"You can broadly separate them into two categories. The first one encompasses taxes and fees. You need to pay a hefty sum to the Big Two for every day you spend in a central star node. Ships and other large assets incur fees as well. Then there are the taxes. There are high taxes for any transaction you make when you are in a central star node. No matter if you want to purchase fuel, raw materials or finished mechs, the MTA or CFA takes a hefty cut out of every trade."

"That sounds like a ripoff." Ves remarked.

"It's not, in a way. The Big Two offer a trading venue with impeccable security. You won't have to worry about pirates swooping in to steal all of the goods or a trading partner reneging on a deal by employing violence. The Big Two will also guarantee every transaction so that you can have absolute confidence that a trade will proceed as agreed upon. You can't obtain such certainty if you conduct the same transaction in an empty star system or in some dingy little colony where the local owners are aligned with one of the parties."

That indeed sounded rather sketchy. Strong and established states like the Heavensword Association and other second-rate states in the regions that the expeditionary fleet were traveling through didn't exist yet. Too little time had passed since the opening of the Red Ocean for alternative trade hubs to establish themselves.

"What about the second category of restrictions?"

"Oh, they are mainly laws and prohibitions that forbid the use of mechs and limits where people can live and stay. Visitors are heavily constrained in what they can do. If they run afoul of one of the prohibitions, then they can expect a steep fine and a direct

passage out of a central star node. In fact, not just the occupied star system, but also a buffer zone around it are subject to restrictions."

The Big Two wanted the incoming pioneers to explore the depth and breadth of the Red Ocean. This wouldn't happen if too many newcomers opted to shelter right under their umbrella!

"So a free trade writ gives us an exemption to all of these trade barriers?" Ves guessed.

"Not all, but some. We still have to pay hefty fees for each day we stay in the star system and we cannot ignore the rules as we will, but what we can do is make direct transactions in a central star node without directly involving the MTA. While this means that they won't guarantee any private trades or crack down on any scams, we don't want to pay heavy taxes and fees either. This can make a huge difference in our profits. In fact, it will also allow us to attract a lot more customers as it is a lot safer to conduct trades in a central star node. I can imagine that weaker clients who aren't confident in their ability to protect themselves will eagerly embrace the opportunity to purchase mechs from us in a safe environment without paying at least 50 percent more."

Ves understood the true value of a free trade writ now. For 10 years starting from entering the Red Ocean, the Larkinson Clan could basically flog its products directly to consumers in huge, convenient hubs that were absolutely safe.

This was a powerful advantage that could definitely allow the LMC's business in the Red Ocean to jump ahead of the competition!

The only issue was that the Larkinsons had to convince potential customers that nothing funny was going on. As long as the LMC built up a measure of trust in this new mech market, then it could easily build up quite a following through selling powerful mechs at a cheaper price in a market environment that was a lot safer than anywhere else in the Red Ocean!

This change had a lot of implications for the revenue generating strategies of the Larkinson Clan going forward. Although the writ only lasted for 10 years, the clan could do a lot with this advantage. It could rapidly build up its reputation as well as spread its products to a much wider audience. By the time the writ ran out and Ves decided not to extend it by yet another time, the living mechs sold by the LMC should have become popular enough that he no longer needed to undercut his competitors in order to gain traction in the Red Ocean's mech market.

Shederin Purnesse was thinking along the same lines. "We can take great advantage of our free trade writ to develop a fixed clientele and forge new friendships in the local scene. This will be crucial later on as it is very difficult to establish crucial trading relationships with organizations that either mine or distribute the raw materials we need to produce our mechs."

That was an important point as the demand for resources was immense. Plenty of pioneers had a lot of money to throw around, but the scarcity in resources due to lack of exploitation and lack of transportation meant that pioneers would have to go through a huge amount of effort to obtain goods that people in the Milky Way could easily order by going on the galactic net!

Shederin's interest reminded Ves that the markets were a lot cruder and less developed in the Red Ocean. This presented a lot of opportunities to aspiring traders to build up crucial relations and establish a powerful presence in the local markets that would definitely pay off in the future!

"We can also use the free trade writ to engage in other direct transactions in a central trade node." Shederin pointed out. "Think about hiring personnel, stocking up on supplies and other activities that can quickly drain our cash reserves. There are so many goods a large fleet needs that it is difficult to source them in a location other than a central star node. We just need to convince the sellers or vendors to transact with us directly."

"This should not be a problem for you, I hope."

The foreign affairs minister looked confident. "I look forward to the challenge. It is exciting to meet entirely different people who come from places much further away from us. Though it will be difficult at the start, it will become easier once we have built up an initial reputation. In newly-established market environments where there are a lot of unknowns, reputation is more important than ever. I believe Chief Minister Raymond will be able to tell you more about how we plan to earn our keep in the Red Ocean."

After they talked some more, Ves soon ended the meeting. "Please write up a report on all of the potential ways we can use the free trade writ to our advantage. Discuss the matter further with the chief ministers. They'll handle this matter further."

"Understood, patriarch."

Ves was a mech designer. It was his job to design mechs that people in the Red Ocean wanted to buy. He could leave the other matters to the other professionals.

Once Shederin left his office, Ves sank deeper in his chair as he continued to think about what the clan should do once it reached the Red Ocean.

The more he heard about it, the more he learned how difficult it was to start off with the right footing.

Proper colony fleets did not have to worry that much at the start as they would likely be carrying all of the goods and supplies they needed to build an independent settlement from scratch.

However, a fleet without colonial ambitions such as his own couldn't just find a random dirtball and stay there for a while. It also couldn't remain in a central star node forever despite possessing a free trade writ.

"The fees are too hefty and we won't be able to obtain all of the resources we need to keep producing mechs." Ves surmised. "This is especially the case if I go to the high-end mech market."

The production capabilities of the Larkinson Clan was substantial, but not enormous by the standards of the mech industry. The best way to make use of the Spirit of Bentheim's production capabilities was to make expensive, high-quality mechs and sell them at higher markups.

In order to make sure that such mechs performed well enough, they needed to incorporate quality components made with rare and not always accessible materials.

Due to the high charges levied on every transaction, there were plenty of traders who refused to take the risk to ship their goods to central star nodes only to sell them at reduced costs or wait a long time before someone was stupid enough to pay inflated prices.

All of this meant that the Larkinsons would definitely have to travel around. This was also his original intention as every pioneer wanted to explore the breadth and depth of the new galaxy. Who knew what kind of treasures or relics they could pick up on an unexplored planet.

The more he thought about it, the more impatient he became. He didn't want to stay in the Milky Way any longer than he needed to be. Though there were plenty of interesting sights to see in the Bardo Star Cluster and surroundings, nothing could make his heart race more than to enter a whole new frontier that humanity had barely explored.

"New people. New locations. New mechs. New possibilities. Less constraints."

Ves knew that he would likely become a different person and a different mech designer if he traveled to the Red Ocean. Whether he would be better off was still in question, but he was more than willing to brave the unknown in order to expand his horizons!

*Chapter 3180: Aiming For Quality*

Life went on after the surprise visit from the MTA.

The expeditionary fleet continued to make its way out of the Bardo Star Cluster without receiving any more surprise visits.

The Fermi Star Cluster was just around the corner. This was an important location despite the fact that the lesser beyonder gate was situated in the Antilla Star Cluster that was just ahead.

No one else but Ves knew that he had a very special reason why he needed to stop by one of the star sectors within the Fermi Star Cluster. With the System hanging over his head, he knew that it would probably get in big trouble if he passed by the Smiling Samual Star Sector without doing anything.

"Damn, I hope Shederin is able to befriend a local guide who can take me to where I need to go. I don't want to have anything to do with these xenophobic dwarves."

Visiting the Vulkan Empire had become a lot more complicated since the outbreak of the Crown Uprising. Though the Golden Skull Alliance hadn't experienced any further chaos after rooting out all of the suspected traitors, the same didn't apply to all of the other states that the expeditionary fleet was passing through.

Some of them descended in the same upheaval that plagued the Ivena Federation where the Purnesse Family came from. Others fell into outright civil war that caused a lot of planets to descend into chaos.

This had nothing to do with the Larkinson Clan, though. The expeditionary fleet had no reason to stop at a dangerous star system and venture to the inner system where it became a lot more vulnerable to attack. The three alliance partners had already stocked up on a lot of goods and supplies at Talulah Silver and could easily go on for several more months without lacking in anything.

Thus the fleet soared forth as if it existed in a different plane from the rest of the galaxy.

Everyone in the fleet became occupied by internal matters.

For example, Venerable Stark took every opportunity she got to take the Amaranto out for practice. The Design Department conducted subsequent tests on its capabilities. Ves even set up a temporary semi-closed testing range to test out the Amaranto's other attack phases.

Just as everyone hoped, the Amaranto's positron beam, the light beam, the kinetic beam, the cutter beam and the disruptor beam were capable of dealing a huge amount of damage in the right circumstances.

When combined with the Beam Bending resonance ability, Venerable Stark had a lot more options to choose from to make sure her resonance-empowered attacks hit the mark at surprising angles.

What Ves and every other mech designer was really interested in was how its masterwork properties made it better.

Though Master Willix provided the Journeymen with a lot more context, she hadn't actually clarified the mechanisms that explained why mech pilots derived more benefits from piloting masterwork mechs.

Neither the Journeymen nor the assistant mech designers who received permission to look at the Amaranto up close had any clues. They just saw a really high-quality mech that was wonderfully put together.

Of all the visitors who loved to stare at the Amaranto, Zanthar Larkinson happened to be the most frequent visitor. He always attempted to get as close as possible until the pressure emanating from the rifle was too much to bear.

By containing a substantial amount of spiritual energy donated by the Illustrious One, the Amaranto had also become a proper expert mech!

This had the unfortunate side effect of making the exquisite expert mech unapproachable to anyone who didn't possess the mental fortitude to endure the thick and overwhelming glow, so that made it a lot more complicated to perform maintenance on the machine.

Fortunately, the Larkinsons were already accustomed to handling prime mechs so the crews of mech technicians all knew they had to work through bots to perform many routine tasks.

Despite the fact that Zanthar had to maintain his distance, the Amaranto was big enough for him to provide a sufficient view from a distance.

"Are you having fun?" Ves asked as he dropped by the hangar bay one day.

"This rifle... I can barely understand why it is better than others." The mech design student softly spoke. "The more I look at it, the more I realize how much I need to work to reach this level. The design. The craftsmanship. The originality. Everything is so great to me that I don't know if I'll ever be able to catch up to your progress."

Ves looked at the luminar crystal rifle himself and felt pretty proud of what he managed to cobble together in the span of a few months.

"You're not even at the starting line, yet. Everything seems wonderful and amazing to you at your current age. It's okay to admire the great works of others, but don't let your envy and lack of ability consume you. From the moment you decide to become a mech designer, everything you do must in some way be conducive to your chosen career path. Staring too much at the Amaranto's weapon won't make you a better mech designer. You have already spent enough time here to gain enough inspiration. What you need to do is to process these gains so that you can make your own weapons."

"How can I do that knowing that my first work probably won't be more than a fraction as good as your work?"

Ves sighed and shook his head. "This is how every Novice and Apprentice feels. You know what, even I feel envious of the capabilities of Master Mech Designers. Yet do you see me study their works obsessively? Am I designing my mechs based on the design choices made by other mech designers?"

"Uhm, no."

"That's because I am following my own path. While I have an affinity for luminar crystal technology, energy weapons are not my forte. They can be yours, though. If you commit to specializing in energy weapons and more specifically luminar crystal weapons, then you'll be able to catch up to me eventually. It might take a decade or two, but you'll definitely be able to pass me by as long as you persist."

Ves had to make sure that Zanthar kept heading in the right direction. He didn't want to go through all of this trouble only for his investment to crash and burn.

Once he finished with encouraging Zanthar to think about his own work rather than wishing he was someone else, Ves took a proper look at his handiwork himself.

He didn't blame Zanthar and other mech designers at all for admiring the majesty of the Amaranto. It was clearly a notch above the Quint and his previous masterworks due to the fact that it started off as a powerful expert mech right away.

What Ves was most interested in was figuring out why expert masterwork mechs was so helpful to the progression of expert pilots.

As a clan leader with ambitions, he wanted his expert pilots to prosper as much as possible. He also felt it was his duty as a mech designer to facilitate the growth of expert pilots that depended on his products.

"Besides, our clan would definitely experience a huge jump in strength and prestige if we have an ace pilot within our ranks."

Though he was not as obsessed about it as the Crossers, it was undeniable that the Larkinson Clan would definitely be able to do more if it proved to be powerful and capable enough to retain its own ace pilots.

Yet in practice few expert pilots ever succeeded in becoming a coveted Saint or halfgod or whatever they were called in different circles.

"A good warrior must be matched with a good weapon."

Ves agreed with this statement. It not only matched his own observations, but also matched with his overall design aspirations. His entire design philosophy revolved around achieving greater symbiosis between man and machine. It made complete sense that this could better be achieved if both sides stood at the same height or 'rung of the ladder'.

The way he contextualized the Ladder of Craftsmanship and how better-quality mechs offered greater assistance was to equate them to mech pilots that were able to transcend their limits and become greater than humans.

Just like how regular mech pilots were able to advance to expert pilots, ordinary mechs were capable of advancing to masterworks!

This was not a perfect comparison, though. It was extremely rare and extremely difficult to transform an existing mech into a masterwork mech.

By far, the most cases of masterwork mechs coming into existence was when they were just completed.

"The mech isn't responsible for enabling it to break through. The mech designer or people who are making it are the ones who have to do all of the hard work!"

Mechs were mechs. They couldn't do anything on their own. It was up to the humans that made them and used them to make them strong and help them grow stronger. This was a lot of effort and in most cases the mechs never came close to reaching the second rung of the ladder.

The biggest hindrance that prevented the MTA from realizing its dream of ushering a new paradigm where technology made people stronger instead of weaker was that it took way too much effort and skill to make masterworks!

Only the top mech designers of human civilization were able to make consistent masterworks. This suggested that a high degree of spiritual development was essential for any creator to make a masterwork on a consistent basis.

This was another consequence to the fact that humans were spiritually deficient by nature. It took extreme effort for mech designers to defy their natural weaknesses and reach a state where they have completely climbed up to the second rung of the ladder.

"Then they have to do it all over again." Ves twitched his mouth.

Beyond masterwork was grand work. According to Master Willix, he shouldn't even begin to think about them until he reached Star Designer. From how much she hyped them up, they must surely be powerful and extraordinary enough to put masterworks firmly in the dirt.

"It's like the jump from expert pilot to ace pilot. There is an enormous gap in between them, but if someone ever manages to bridge it, then the rewards are massive!"

Just thinking about it already made Ves despair a bit. The road to becoming one of the best mech designers in the galaxy was so long and difficult to traverse that he felt a bit like Zanthar for a moment.

Fortunately, he was a lot more mature than his student and possessed plenty of confidence. He quickly reined in his emotions and focused more on the immediate picture.

"I should just think about how to do more masterworks first. I might not obsess over them as much as my wife, but it is still essential for me to get a grip on them. The sooner I climb up to the second rung of the ladder, the smoother my journey to Star Designer becomes."

He had gained an extremely crucial clue from Master Willix yesterday. Every Star Designer should be capable of developing grand works, so being able to make products of extremely high quality was probably one of the prerequisites to reaching it! If Ves was able to get a good grip on this ahead of time, then he had one less problem to worry about when he got older!

"Hmmm. How can I increase my chances of making masterwork mechs?" He wondered.

This was a daunting question and one that many mech designers had asked.

If masterworks were products that transcended their limits, then trying to make them right off the bat was as impossible as trying to augment a growing fetus so that the baby came into the world as an expert pilot instead of a regular child right from birth!

"This is an impossible challenge!"