

## Mech 3191

### *Chapter 3191: Cross Business*

After instructing Ranya to set up a new secret research department, Ves bid her goodbye and returned to his shuttle.

As his vehicle left the hangar bay of the Dragon's Den and began to move towards the Cross fleet under escort, he settled down and began to think about the implications of what he had started.

A new research department centered around studying spirituality from a biotech perspective would likely yield interesting results, especially if Ves dropped by every now and then to provide assistance. There was no way the research department would be able to get anywhere without him supplying his spiritual energy or donating his biological tissue.

As long as everything went well, Ves would have an explanation of what his daughter was going through and whether he could acquire the same benefits. Though he was certainly a lot more powerful than his unborn baby at the moment, if he extrapolated her growth trajectory, she could easily surpass him once she was well into her teenage years.

The thought of trying to deal with a rebellious teenage daughter whose spiritual prowess exceeded his own already gave him a headache.

"Is this what every first-generation parent of a designer baby feels like?" He wondered as he held Lucky in his lap and petted the pet's head.

"Meow."

"Oh yeah, I forgot. Goldie is sort of your daughter, right?"

"Meow!" Lucky proudly raised his head.

"So how do you keep her in line?"

"Meow...?"

"You mean, you don't?"

Lucky responded with a helpless expression. "Meow."

So his cat basically failed and turned into a loser dad. How swell. At least Goldie turned out okay with the help of other design spirits like Qilanxo.

After chatting senselessly with his cat, his shuttle finally reached one of the hangar bays of the massive Hemmington Cross.

He hadn't visited the fleet carrier in a while. Each time he exited his shuttle and beheld the Crossers and the overall atmosphere on their flagship, he could easily differentiate the evolution of the Cross Clan over time.

There were a lot more personnel aboard this ship than before. The Cross Clan hadn't expanded their fleet, but they readily took advantage of their new kinship network to recruit tens of thousands of military-minded people who became attracted to the promises and ideals of the Patriarch Reginald and his clan.

It was fairly easy for Ves to distinguish the newer faces from the other ones. The authentic trueblood Crossers carried themselves with a strong and unique demeanor that originated from many years of living in the Garlen Empire. The foreigners who grew up in more peaceful and placid states still showed their relative freshness and inexperience.

A good battle or two would quickly sort them out and complete their integration into the Cross Clan. Ves was quite certain about this as his own clan faced a similar situation. A kinship network could only do so much in tying vastly different people together.

An attendant from the clan welcomed the honored visitor to the flagship of the Cross Clan before leading the way to an observation deck at the upper levels of the fleet carrier.

Though Ves wasn't able to see as much of the vessel as he wanted, he could already tell that the clan had taken several powerful steps forward. They were far from the shabby band of military refugees that Ves initially met in the Cinach System.

What was new since his last visit was that the Hemmington Cross' interior featured extensive upgrades. Older, worn modules had been replaced by newer ones. Several sections that previously looked fragile now looked a lot more sturdy after the Crossers applied a lot of structural reinforcements.

All in all, the Hemmington Cross was able to take a greater beating than before. This was good news as the capital ship used to be a prestige project whose size was meant to impress and intimidate rivals outside of combat. As an actual combat vessel, her ability to resist and contain damage was not as good as other fleet carriers like the smaller but much more practical Antonio Cross.

"Where are they getting the money, though?" He wondered.

The Cross Clan on its own didn't possess any native industries when it initially fled from the Vicious Mountain Star Sector. The only variable that presented the Crossers with a new option was its new Senior Mech Designer.

"What has the professor been up to lately?"

Ves had not kept up with any news concerning the former pirate designer. After all, his expert mech design projects along with issues related to his own clan already took up all of his time.

"Well, I guess I will find out soon enough."

After being led into a massive observation room, Ves slowly approached the center where Patriarch Reginald Cross and Professor Benedict Cortez were sitting in front of one of the windows. The pair of senior leaders were enjoying an expansive view of the hundreds of starships that made up the allied fleet.

From this distance, the numerous sub-capital ships all resembled tiny fish that were difficult to distinguish from each other. Only the capital ships possessed enough definition for humans to be able to identify them with the naked eye.

The majority of capital ships belonged to the Larkinson Clan. This was a great source of pride to Ves and he couldn't help but needle the Crosser leader about their own stock of capital ships.

"Hello." He greeted as he plopped onto the only available chair. "Nice view. I can't help but observe that your own fleet is rather skinny compared to mine. We're getting closer and closer to Tarnished Crown. The time to acquire capital ships is running out. Will you be able to bring enough powerful assets into the Red Ocean?"

Patriarch Reginald narrowed his eyes but Professor Benedict maintained his cool.

"If we required assistance in this area, we would have contacted your clan beforehand." The latter replied. "We have already made some arrangements and we are already in the process of acquiring additional ships and merits. It might take some time, but you will not find us wanting by the time we reach the beyonder gate."

Well, that was one less problem to worry about. When a Senior Mech Designer told him that he would get something done, then Ves had no reason to question the claim.

A few moments passed by as Ves calmly enjoyed the view. He found it rather novel to look at the distant red hull and iconic giant cat-shaped prow of his flagship from this perspective. It was by far the most impressive and flamboyant capital ship in the fleet.

"We've started a couple of new industries in recent months." Professor Benedict spoke up again as he turned towards Ves.

He studiously analyzed Lucky who was currently staring right back with a challenging stare.

"Meow."

Ves pressed his hand on Lucky's head in order to restrain his pet. It wouldn't do for his cat to piss off the Skull Architect!

"I've been wondering where all of the money is coming from. What markets did you decide to enter?"

"We are currently working on entering two related industries. The Cross Mech Corporation is our principal mech company that is responsible for selling both mechs and mech designs. We are only engaged in the latter at the moment, but we hope to set up manufacturing in the Red Ocean that will service the regional markets."

"I see." Ves pursed his lips. "If you don't mind me asking, how will the products of your mech company stand out from the competition?"

Professor Benedict responded with a sly smile. "While I might not have your ability to grant mechs with a unique factor, I am more than capable of designing mechs that directly meets the needs of most customers in the Red Ocean. According to my market analysis, the dearth of industries, the bottleneck in transportation and the lack of availability of many materials and exotics that are common in the Milky Way means that there is a great demand for mech models that are adapted to the local circumstances. Every mech company and mech designer must either adapt their current designs or start from scratch."

This presented an advantage to less established mech designers and mech companies. While the bigger mech corporations would also be doing their best to capture the emerging mech market of the Red Ocean, they had to begin anew as well as it was incredibly uneconomical for them to export their products from the Milky Way to the Red Ocean.

"From what it sounds like, this isn't the only company that your clan has started." Ves remarked.

"That's correct." The professor said. "We are also aiming to branch out into the research and development of mech systems and components. We decided to erect the Cross Development Center to develop efficient, rugged and reliable mech parts that we can use for ourselves and license out to others including your clan. I'm aware that you have gained access to two different expansive component libraries, but they will eventually become obsolete without active development. The CDC is meant to build upon the Cross Clan's existing tech library and adapt all of the components and devices we need to the circumstances of the Red Ocean."

Ves became a little shocked at what he heard. He hadn't put much thought about acquiring components and component designs that were modern and cost-effective

over time. He thought he would just continue to license the appropriate gear from outside companies, but who knew whether that was sustainable in the future.

The Larkinson Clan's business ventures were currently centered around both mechs and biotechnology products, though the latter was still getting up to speed.

Those were two huge industries that required a lot of attention, investment and commitment. Though Ves could order his clan to set up a new company that tried to perform the same activities as the Cross Development Center, it wouldn't be the same.

First, the Crossers enjoyed a head start in this sector. Second, Professor Cortez was much more capable of developing quality components than anyone in the Larkinson Clan.

Though Ves wanted his clan to develop its own homegrown mech parts eventually, now was not the time. Rather than relying on external offerings, it was a lot cheaper and more convenient to rely on the products offered by the CDC, at least for the foreseeable time.

Ves threw Professor Benedict a look that conveyed that he knew what the Crossers were doing.

The Cross Clan wanted to show its usefulness to the Golden Skull Alliance. At the same time, it hoped that the Larkinsons would become dependent on its excellent mech parts. Another consideration was that it also aimed to generate and maintain a competitive advantage in this industry.

As long as the Golden Skull Alliance remained intact, its partners would always have to turn to the Crossers in order to license and gain permission to use its powerful and efficient tech!

Ves didn't mind too much. He was willing to grant the Cross Clan a victory in this arena because he knew the Crossers would have to knock on the doors of the Larkinson Clan if they required any human augmentation services. Already the Larkinson Biotech Institute had begun to offer its simpler augmentation services to both the Glory Seekers and the Crossers.

"Good luck with that." He replied in a good-natured manner. "I'm sure a Senior like you will be able to come up with a large and expansive catalog of parts that we can all use to put together our next mechs. I'm not inclined to stick with one source, though. It's a big market out there and I'm sure that other entrepreneurs in the Red Ocean have the same idea as yours."

Professor Benedict responded with a grin. "Oh, I have no doubt about that. I'm sure their own offerings will be highly competitive, but unless you develop a close relationship with them, I doubt that they will be able to offer what you really need."

"And that is...?"

"Custom mech parts that are completely tailored to your needs... These are essential to your expert mechs."

*Chapter 3192: Demanding Patriarch*

Professor Benedict brought up a good point.

After completing a couple of expert mech design projects, Ves and his colleagues became more and more aware of the importance of having good expert mech component designs on hand.

Unlike ordinary mech component designs, the ones geared towards expert mechs were a lot harder to come by. Although the MTA offered a relatively bland selection of standard components that were appropriate for expert mechs, the good stuff was noticeably absent.

The fact of the matter was that expert mechs and anything related to it was considered a matter of strategic interest. Any advantage that a state gained in an aspect of expert mechs provided it with a powerful advantage that might make a meaningful difference in any conflicts.

It would be stupid for a Hexer mech designer to develop an excellent mech component only to enable the Fridaymen to license this new product!

This was why it had become a custom for developers to limit their public offerings to older and outdated expert mech parts. If the Larkinson Clan didn't initially gain access to Hexer components, then he would have been forced to make use of lower-performing alternatives that were at least a generation out of date.

Would his expert mechs still be strong? Certainly. They just wouldn't be able to keep up with rival expert mechs as well.

There were many different factors that determined the performance of an expert mech. The quality of its components was an immense influence that always determined the foundation of any mech, so being able to partner up with a friendly developer that could provide the parts his clan needed was quite convenient.

Of course, it would be even better if the Larkinson Clan could take care of its own business, but that was not viable at this stage.

There was no one in the Larkinson Clan that possessed an advantage in this area. He himself was responsible for turning the LMC into a success and all of the Lifers his clan picked up from the LRA were the key to turning the Larkinson Biotech Institute into a promising new business venture.

Unless Ves was able to pick up an entire component development company somewhere, there was little hope that his clan would be able to catch up with the Crossers anytime soon.

From a broader perspective, this kind of development would probably continue to take place. Neither the Larkinsons nor the Crossers were large enough to cover every industry. Within a solid alliance, it made much more sense for every partner to focus on what they were good at and rely on others to service their other needs.

Ves did not mind it if that happened, though eventually the Larkinson Clan really had to learn how to take care of its own needs. It did not have to be as good as the market leaders in every sector, but his clansmen should at least be able to develop its most essential expert mech parts for security reasons.

"When will you be able to provide us with a full lineup of mech components?" Ves asked.

"It will probably take up to five years for us to build up an expansive catalog." Professor Benedict said after a brief moment. "We have already gathered several teams of capable and experienced developers that I have managed to poach from other companies, but it still takes months and years to design new component designs that are actually better than what we have. Technological progress cannot be rushed, particularly when it has already reached an advanced stage."

As a mech designer, Ves fully understood what the Senior was talking about. That was the great thing about speaking with other mech designers. Their shared language and understanding was so great that they could easily dispense with the nonsense that they had to bring up when they talked to other people.

Of course, as their discussion became increasingly more technical, Patriarch Reginald was feeling increasingly more left out. His force of will eventually flared, causing the other two to halt.

"Patriarch Larkinson." The expert pilot addressed his guest. "You and your people can discuss business matters with us at a later date. I had a different purpose in mind when I invited you over. Since our last meeting, you've managed to build up quite an impressive track record when it comes to designing expert mech. In my judgement, the Dark Zephyr that has been zipping about is an impressive disruptor, while the Amaranto's firepower is incredibly helpful from what little I have been able to observe. I hear that you are just about to add a pair of additional expert mechs to your lineup."

Ves nodded. This was hardly a secret to his allies. They needed to know at least some details so that they could take these new additions into account when they made their battle plans.



"Correct. While we're here in Amswick, I plan to fabricate an expert spearman mech and an expert swordsman mech. Although they are both offensive machines, they are meant to adopt different approaches in battle. The former is more capable of fighting head-on while the latter is more suitable as a flanker."

"Hmmm, that fits with the fighting styles of Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise. I have great respect for both of them. Of course, I am more hopeful for your younger expert pilots. Venerable Joshua particularly sparks my interest. Out of all of your expert pilots, his love for mechs is more pure."

That was a considerable endorsement from the most expert pilot in the expeditionary fleet. Ves smiled in response.

"Thank you for that. I hope to nurture each of our expert pilots into great heroes, and providing them with the right mechs is the first step to doing so. Our Design Department is already more than halfway through with finishing our current round of mech design projects."

Patriarch Benedict faintly became more excited when he heard that. It was obvious to track the changes to his mood because his force of will so obviously radiated his strongest emotions like an open book.

"Have you considered the matter of designing my new expert mech?"

Ves nodded. "I've already put some thought behind this commission, but most of my attention is taken up by my existing projects. I hope you understand that those come first. Once I am done with them, I will have plenty of time to think about other projects."

"When will that take?"

"Hmmm... four months, give or take. Once we complete our last two expert mech designs, I will have plenty of time in my schedule to embark on other projects."

"Will you be able to deliver a masterwork expert mech for me?" Patriarch Reginald abruptly asked as his anticipation caused the air to become more charged. "I greatly admire your Amaranto. It is a true ranged fighting machine beyond compare. If you are able to supply me with a masterwork mech, I will readily pledge eternal friendship and support to you for as long as I live!"

Ves tried his best to stay calm when the aggressive expert pilot was practically distorting his entire surroundings with his will.

It was as if the expert pilot wanted to force Ves into saying yes!

"Uhm... creating a masterwork expert mech was just a fluke. Just ask the professor over here how likely it is for me to repeat my success."



The Senior couldn't allow his nominal superior to continue this pursuit. He slowly placed his hand on Reginald's shoulder.

"We've talked about this already. The young Larkinson mech designers have already defied expectations once. Each of them are far from being able to fabricate masterwork mechs on demand. If even I can't do it, how can you expect our guest to do any better?"

Patriarch Reginald threw Professor Benedict a peculiar look.

This was the problem with letting laymen talk about mech design. While Patriarch Reginald no doubt possessed a greater understanding of mechs than the average person, he was not a mech designer and did not understand all of the effort it took to create some of the best mechs of someone's career.

"You should trust your resident mech designer, Reginald." Ves softly said. "Forcing us won't get you anywhere. A mech will either become a masterwork or not. It would be great if we can succeed, but even if we aren't able to elevate the quality of your expert mech to the top, it should still be high enough to provide you with greater support than your current mech."

Though the Cross Patriarch did not wish to accept this answer, he was smart enough to know that reality wasn't in his favor. He subsided his oppressive will and slumped a bit on his chair.

"I expect you to do your utmost to satisfy my needs. That is why I am willing to ally with your clan and that is also why I allow my clan to accompany your fleet as you make your way into this hazardous region."

"I wouldn't call the Vulcan Empire a hazardous region."

"It is to people like us. I don't like it. Can you tell us straight why you want to bring your entire clan into the most dangerous star sector in this region of space?"

Ves found it ridiculous to compare the Smiling Samuel Star Sector to perilous places like the Nyxian Gap. It wasn't as if the former was occupied by murderous scum, lethal space-time anomalies and horrendously powerful dark gods!

He briefly thought about how much he should reveal. He supposed the Cross Clan deserved to know a bit of the truth considering that they were willing to risk their lives to stick with his clan.

"I'm on a mission of sorts." Ves reluctantly said. "A very big mech designer who is much more powerful than you can imagine has found out that someone left a certain... package behind. Now, back then, Smiling Samuel hadn't turned into a dwarf-dominated star sector like today, so it has become a lot more challenging than usual for someone trustworthy to be able to retrieve this package. That is where I come in. My task is to get

in, retrieve the package and get out. It's as simple as that. I have no intention of staying in the Vulcan Empire any longer than necessary."

The two Crossers took in his words. Though they were wondering who exactly issued this mission to Ves and what kind of package merited so much attention, they knew better than to ask any further.

"Why you?" Patriarch Reginald asked instead. "Why not hand this responsibility to someone else? If this individual is as powerful as you imply, I'm sure he can contact the dwarves directly."

Ves shrugged. "Who knows. I can't give you any answers on this. All I know is that I have to retrieve the package in person. In order for me to do that, I have to bring the rest of my clan along as even I don't think it is wise to enter a dwarf country alone."

It still wasn't a wise decision, but none of the three bothered to mention the obvious.

Reginald tapped his armrest. "I don't feel reassured. We cannot abandon you and let you enter Smiling Samuel alone, but our Crossers aren't willing to die for a cause they have no part of. I cannot ask my soldiers to make the ultimate sacrifice just to satisfy your personal ambitions."

"I... understand." Ves slowly said. "I would feel the same if I was in your shoes. It's not easy to lead a clan."

"Just so." Reginald briefly smiled. "Now, I can do something about this, but only if you give me a reason to persuade my men to go along with your latest scheme. Are you able to do that, Larkinson?"

Ah. Ves finally got it. The Cross Patriarch wanted to negotiate with him. If Ves and his clan wasn't able to cough up anything worthwhile, then the Cross Clan might not decide to back the Larkinsons up in their upcoming venture.

Ves had to think carefully on what he had to say next.

#### *Chapter 3193: Interesting Information*

Alliances were fragile.

In some cases, they could be considered a single entity. In other cases, they were fractured beyond belief.

Ves had encountered numerous states throughout his travels that exhibited both sides of the equation.

The Friday Coalition was a typical example that embodied both extremes.

On the one hand, they united together and formed a common bond to defend against the persistent threat of the Hexadric Hegemony.

On the other hand, of the original nine partners that founded the Coalition, only six of them were left.

What happened to the three forgotten partners that seemed to have disappeared from history in the time between the founding of the state and the outbreak of the Komodo War?

Obviously, something very fishy took place that caused the three Coalition partners to disappear without getting entangled in open conflict.

Then there was the old Vesia Kingdom. While Ves wasn't sure how much it had changed after the aftermath of the Sand War caused it to swallow up a lot of ruined territories, but before this massive event, its various noble houses ostensibly answered to the royal house but in practice pursued their own ends.

The ducal houses had become too powerful, causing them to develop a distinct lack of respect towards the central authorities and a lot of animosity towards their fellow rivals. If not for the fact that they possessed a common hatred against the Bright Republic, they would have long descended into more overt power struggles!

"Then there's the Garlen Empire."

On the surface, it was one huge second-rate state that dominated the Vicious Mountain Star Sector. Unlike the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony, it did not have to share territory with any other rival state.

That should have turned the Garlen Empire into a calm and peaceful refuge where the only threat to its territorial integrity came from beyond its star sector.

Yet the glory hounds of this infamous state were not satisfied with peace! The aggressive ace pilots and expert pilots hungered for greater advancement and eternal glory, and an absence of conflict was not conducive to furthering these goals.

So what did they do instead? They turned on each other and provoked conflicts with the flimsiest of excuses!

Therefore, alliances were not necessarily harmonious. If an organization really thought that a treaty could protect them from betrayal from their own allies, then it was incredibly naive!

The Cross Clan happened to fall victim to this kind of betrayal. After its flight from Vicious Mountain, it surely had to have learned a couple of lessons. With the addition of

a former pirate leader in the form of Professor Benedict, there was no way that the Crossers remained as naive as before!

Right now, the Larkinson Clan was in its ascendancy. The Cross Clan attached itself to the upstarts because it depended on Ves to provide them with the benefits the Crossers needed to rebuild their own glory.

The establishment of the Cross Clan's exclusive kinship network and Patriarch Reginald's strong desire for Ves to contribute to the design of his next expert mech were both compelling benefits. They were the primary reasons why the Cross Clan was willing to follow the lead of the Larkinson Clan.

Yet leading the Crossers straight into a potentially hostile state that was much more powerful than the Golden Skull Alliance was definitely stretching their willingness to play along.

Ves would essentially be taking advantage over the fact that he possessed a hold over the Cross Clan if he forced Patriarch Reginald and his men to come along his risky trip.

If he wanted to placate his allies and ensure the Golden Skull Alliance remained stable, he needed to throw them another bone so that they remained committed to defending the Larkinson Clan.

This was quite problematic as he wasn't able to think up anything that sounded attractive enough. He couldn't guarantee the delivery of a masterwork mech and he had already provided them with a kinship network.

He supposed he could choose to offer other valuable services such as providing the Crossers with companion spirits or battle networks, but Ves wasn't stupid enough to spread his own trump cards.

The main reasons why he was okay with sharing his kinship network was because it didn't threaten him and would always remain under his control. The same could not be said for his other spiritual products.

Ves scratched his cheek. It became clear that he did not have any good ideas at the moment.

Since he couldn't come up with an answer, Professor Benedict decided to give him a hand.

"What do you think about our clan, Ves?"

"Huh? Uhm, you have done well in picking yourselves up from your lowest point. I no longer have the impression that you are in decline anymore. Your clan grows stronger with each day that passes. That is quite impressive. It's not easy to dispel the

depression that comes from losing so many loved ones and being run out of your territory like a pack of defeated dogs."

Patriarch Reginald briefly clenched his fists. "We cannot give the traitors the satisfaction of ending us completely. We may have lost much of our might and glory, but we have not lost sight of our dignity and honor! As long as we hold our heads high, we defy the Praetors, the Planats, the Billards, the Chardons and any other enemy that has conspired to annihilate our clan!"

Both Ves and Professor Benedict had to lean back from the ferocity that the expert pilot was exuding. The Cross of Rebirth that hung on his waist even seemed to resonate with his earnest will, causing Patriarch Reginald to come across as a tragic hero who was hellbent on exacting his revenge!

Ves lightly coughed. "Uhm, yes. That's a really good sentiment. The best way to refute their attempts at taking down your clan is to grow it to an even greater height. In my opinion, the best way to do that is to take advantage of the opportunities of the Red Ocean to grow to an even greater height than the Garlen Empire could ever accomplish. Vicious Mountain can only offer so much, and the star sector is already divided into hundreds of different tribes and clans. There is no meaningful room for expansion over there, so it should only be a matter of time before your clan can surpass all of your enemies."

Of course, it was not as simple as that. Rewards always come paired with risks. The greater the reward, the greater the risk. It was true that it was easy for pioneers to become rich and powerful in the Red Ocean, but there were even greater odds for them to face ruination!

Professor Benedict smiled at Ves in a peculiar way. "While it is good for our clan to spite its original enemies by surpassing them in size and wealth, this form of revenge isn't quite as satisfying as crushing the Praetors, Planats and any other enemy that had a hand in driving the Cross Clan out of Vicious Mountain, don't you think so, Ves?"

Ves frowned a bit. "We're too weak to beat them in person. I know how it feels to be unable to punch your enemies directly in the face. I too have grudges against certain powerful enemies like the Friday Coalition, but do you see me turning around and pitting my tiny clan against the might of an entire second-rate state? We can't let our personal desires get in the way of doing what is best for our people. Exacting direct revenge won't accomplish anything except causing all of us to fall just so we can derive selfish satisfaction out of the act."

He had a high interest in staying alive. Committing revenge felt good but not if he had to pay an excessive price. He always found it irrational for many people to forsake everything including their own existences just to get payback for their perceived slights!

Ves dearly hoped that Patriarch Reginald and his band of Crossers weren't a part of this group. If they were, then the Larkinson Clan would seriously have to reconsider its association with the crazy Cross Clan!

Fortunately, Patriarch Reginald forcibly calmed himself down. Though it was more than obvious that he wanted to do exactly what Ves feared, the expert pilot didn't completely disregard his responsibilities to his own clansmen. He was a lot better than his father in this regard.

"We can dream all we want, but without power, they will always remain figments of our imagination." The expert pilot gruffly spoke. "The only way for our clan to exceed our rivals is for us to gain more strength. My ascension to my father's old rank is all that matters to us. In the event that you are unable to supply a masterwork expert mech to me, do you have any other means of enabling my promotion?"

Ves helplessly spread his hands. "Who do you think I am? A miracle worker? No one has a foolproof way of producing ace pilots, let alone expert pilots"

"The MTA seems to think you have a chance." Reginald stated as he pinned Ves with a pointed stare. "Haven't they assigned a batch of its own mech pilots for you to convert into expert pilots?"

It seemed that the Cross Clan wasn't completely blind. Though news of this mission shouldn't have spread, it was hard for close allies to miss Master Willix's arrival and the appearance of twenty highly competent guest pilots within the ranks of the Larkinson Clan.

Ves sheepishly smiled. "The MTA has a lot of faith in us due to our history of producing a noticeable amount of expert pilots and expert candidates. I've been trying to tell them that this is not because we stumbled upon a secret formula or anything. While I do believe that living mechs can help with nurturing mech pilots, my mech company has sold tens of millions of living mechs and I haven't heard any stories about lots of breakthroughs. The actual reason why our clan did well during our journey through the Nyxian Gap is because of the inherent weirdness of this anomalous region. Our mech pilots have a much harder time advancing now that we have left it behind."

This was a plausible-sounding excuse that Ves had used multiple times to brush away the noteworthy breakthroughs. It had the benefit of being true to an extent.

"I have heard that you... have developed another solution." The Cross Patriarch slowly said.

Ves raised his eyebrows as he petted Lucky again. "Oh? That's news to me. If I had another method up to my sleeves, I would have already applied it to my own mech pilots."

"I have received word from scattered survivors from Prosperous Hill and other sources that you have come up with a new invention in the field. It is said that you have created a set of four artifacts that are able to induce different emotions in people. They are called the Aspects of Lufa, if I am correct."

"Uhm, that's correct."

"We know what three of them can do, but you have always kept the fourth one under wraps, is that correct?"

"Yes..."

"Well, from what I have learned, you have called the final statue the Aspect of Transcendence. While I do not have any solid facts on hand, am I correct in guessing that this is an experimental new tool of yours to induce breakthroughs in mech pilots?"

Both Patriarch Reginald and Professor Benedict were paying very close attention to Ves right now!

The abrupt increase in scrutiny made Ves feel as if he was being put on the spot. His mind was racing even as he forcibly froze his body to avoid giving away any clues.

Damn! How the hell did the Cross Clan find all of this out?! It shouldn't be too difficult to learn about some of the Aspects of Lufa, but Ves had always tried to obscure the Aspect of Transcendence as much as possible.

How did the Crossers uncover the existence of this fourth Aspect? Was there a traitor within the ranks of the Larkinson Clan? That shouldn't be possible!

#### *Chapter 3194: The Forgotten Aspect*

On the surface, the Cross Clan was made up of a large number of soldiers who only knew how to fight and how to prepare for fights. They did not give anyone the impression that they actually maintained an effective intelligence operation.

The history of the Cross Clan and most notably its fall also did not show any indication that it was good in this area. The stereotypical Garlener disdained trickery and subterfuge and he couldn't imagine that the Crossers suddenly gained a lot of competence in this area.

It just wasn't possible for them to turn one of their weaknesses into a strength so quickly.

However, when Ves turned his attention to Professor Benedict Cortez, he felt he might have found the answer to this



One thing was for sure. Ves seriously needed to have a good conversation with Calabast after this meeting. Had she missed this recent development? Or was it none of her fault?

Ves felt pretty confident about the security situation of his fleet after the Black Cats acquired the Blinding Banshee. Yet what about before the acquisition of this espionage ship? Perhaps the Cross Clan managed to take advantage of the security holes that existed prior to the recent improvement in security.

He briefly turned to Professor Benedict. What if the change didn't come from the original Crossers, but a powerful newcomer who possessed a different outlook?

It was not that hard to imagine that a pirate designer like the Skull Architect set up his own network of informants. His entry into the Cross Clan was the most viable explanation why the Crossers had become a lot more capable in gathering useful intelligence.

He could contemplate all of that later. First, he had to get past this moment. He should have brought Shederin Purnesse along. The entire reason why he appointed the old man to foreign affairs minister was so that he could let the professionals handle talks like these!

Right now, he had to decide how much he could afford to reveal. While the existence of this statue was rather sensitive, he didn't actually mind it that much if one of his allies found out about it. Out of all of the secrets in his closet, this one wasn't that big of a deal, especially since it was defective.

This was why he decided to come clean. In any case, the Cross Clan was still a friend and he also needed its support in the times to come. If he could increase their commitment to the alliance in exchange for exposing one of his less important secrets, then that was still a favorable transaction!

"The Aspect of Transcendence is deeply flawed." Ves reluctantly explained. "I don't know how you have heard of it, but it and every other Aspect of Lufa is based around principles that I don't even understand. The nature of my creations is so esoteric and metaphysical that my control over them is tenuous at best. This is one of the downsides to trying to create 'living' products."

Professor Benedict nodded in agreement. "I did notice that in your work. The glows of your characteristic mech designs don't seem to come from you. I have long speculated that you are using your design philosophy as a vehicle to leverage the power of other metaphysical phenomena."

That... was quite an accurate description. Senior Mech Designers really shouldn't be underestimated, especially someone who no doubt performed extensive analyses on his work.

Ves briefly smiled. "What I have done with my Aspects of Lufa is more direct than that. The result are four organic statues that each express four different varieties of glows. Two of them are rather average and can even be obtained in the Yeina Star Cluster's mech market in the form of the Treatment Editions of my Sanctuary model."

"We know. We purchased a batch of both variants." Patriarch Reginald answered. "They are completely useless to me but they have actually been helpful in helping our more traumatized Crossers gain some perspective. I thank you for that. While your two Sanctuary variants cannot heal damaged survivors on their own, my doctors tell me that they are powerful tools when used as part of larger treatment programs."

"It is my pleasure. Many of my mechs are designed to kill. I'm glad that my work can also make people better."

Ves always derived satisfaction from hearing that his products had served his customers well. This was the dream of every creator and he was no different.

"I have also heard something about your third statue." Professor Benedict leaned forward. "It is supposedly capable of making people completely rational. That is quite interesting, don't you think?"

Ves nonchalantly shrugged. "It carries its own risks. Humans are emotional creatures by heart. Most individuals don't cope very well with losing all of their emotions. It only makes sense to employ the Aspect of Rationality in highly specific situations."

The Senior Mech Designer leaned back in his chair and nodded. "You are correct in that. Rational humans are a special breed of individuals. It is hard for people to get started on this path, but perhaps it might be easier if they are able to benefit from the glow of this statue of yours."

"I don't see the point in that." Ves frowned. "What's wrong with ordinary mech designers who rely on their passions and emotions? I can't imagine myself designing mechs by faking emotions instead of embodying them for real."

"That is because you haven't properly witnessed the full capabilities of a rational mech designer. It is not for nothing that the MTA prefers to employ those who can maintain as much objective and untainted reason as possible. As a trade association, it has a high demand for mech designers who can deconstruct and systematically apply the myriad of unique methods that many of our colleagues have developed. You cannot truly understand someone else's work in its totality without letting go of all of your preconceived biases and subjective tastes."

That was actually quite interesting to hear. Ves already thought along these lines but it was nice to hear a corroborating opinion from a better mech designer.

"The business of the MTA has nothing to do with us." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "I have no need to steal the work of other mech designers and I don't intend to replace the MTA."

"Hmm, correct. We are speaking about your fourth and evidently most radical statue of this series. Can you explain to us why you describe it as flawed? What are its defects?"

Ves thought carefully on what he should say here. A part of him didn't want to say anything, but another part of him actually felt it might be useful to consult with other knowledgeable experts. A second opinion was always handy and someone like Professor Benedict most certainly possessed deep insights in many areas related to mechs.

"Well... for one, people's heads tend to blow up when they are subjected to its influence. Don't ask me how many times this has occurred."

Neither Patriarch Reginald nor Professor Benedict looked disturbed at the mention that Ves had conducted a disturbing experiment where an unknown amount of people lost their lives just to try out a new invention.

They were certainly pleasant company.

"Experimental results can show a large amount of variance depending on the traits of your test subjects. What population of test subjects did you take your samples from, Larkinson?"

Ves twitched his mouth. The professor certainly knew what he was talking about.

"Criminals. Scum. People who got what was coming to them, basically. I tested it out on both norms and mech pilots, but neither of them have yielded any positive results."

"These 'volunteers' of yours are weak-willed cowards and losers who do not deserve the gift of ascension." Reginald declared. "Expert pilots like myself must discipline our minds and forge our wills into unbreakable steel. Each of us have undergone our own journeys where we are required to pass each and every test that comes our way. Few are worthy to make it to the end. Most are found wanting and will either stop making progress or die in the pursuit of an undeserved reward. In my judgement, trash can never produce greatness. You should have started off with better stock."

"I cannot justify the decision to subject the Aspect of Transcendence to people outside of this category!" Ves self-righteously retorted! "I especially can't condone any attempts to subject my own clansmen to an experimental product that has already produced a sizable body count. My duty as their patriarch is to lead them and protect them, not sacrifice their lives in order to further my personal ambitions."

Ves made his stance clear. The Aspect of Transcendence was too dangerous and he would not agree to using it on anyone who was decent. Even he had bottom lines.

"You've become stuck, then." Professor Benedict observed. "Your experiments on low-quality test subjects have produced constant failures, but you might be able to gain a different result if you make use of better stock. It is regrettable that you are not willing to do so. This statue has great potential if you can actually prove that it can live up to your promises. I do not believe you bestowed it with such a grandiose name if you never had any intentions of making it live up to it, am I right?"

Damn. Professor Benedict understood Ves a little too well.

"I have developed many ambitious ideas over the course of my career. Few of them succeed. That is the nature of innovation. These days, I don't even think about the Aspect of Transcendence anymore. It's already a failure in my eyes."

"What you consider to be a failure might actually turn out to be a priceless treasure."

"You want to obtain my statue?" Ves narrowed his eyes.

"No. We recognize that it is your invention and that its use is completely up to you." The Senior quickly replied. "What we are actually thinking about is resuming your experiment with a different recipient in mind. Instead of using them on low-quality stock, we instead have a better idea."

The professor pointedly looked at the Cross Patriarch.

"You..."

"In the event that you have failed to deliver a masterwork expert mech to me, I shall bear the test of your Aspect of Transcendence myself." The expert pilot stated. "I must advance to ace pilot one way or another. If I cannot do it the old-fashioned way, then I am not afraid to resort to a more unconventional means."

"That's crazy! You don't know what you are talking about!"

"My time is running out!" Reginald shouted back while pointing at his greying hair. "I have already passed my peak stage as a mech pilot. With each year that passes, my reflexes and thinking grow less acute. My chances of breaking through dwindle as a consequence. While my father has managed to defy the odds, I am not as talented as him. I need a faster, more assured way of breaking through, and I see much hope in your mysterious statue. Do not underestimate my resolve. Where others have failed, I shall remain unbroken. With my strength combined with the valued teachings of my father, I am confident I will succeed in breaking through. I only need a catalyst to push me forward."

Ves looked confused. "Why don't you find a war or something? The best way for mech pilots to surpass their limits has always been to risk their lives in battle."

"I have a responsibility to my clan." Reginald said. "As a fellow patriarch, I am sure you understand. I vowed to preserve the remnants of my clan, but at the same time I must become a Saint, which I will never be able to accomplish if I knowingly lead my men into doom. Therefore, even if your Aspect of Transcendence poses a greater threat to my life, at least I shall bear this risk alone. Whether I live or die, the Cross Clan shall live on. I can put myself to the test with ease if that is the case."

"..."

This guy's obsession was truly unshakable. Ves didn't mind it if Patriarch Reginald wanted to commit suicide, but the problem was whether the Cross Clan would be happy with that!

If the Crossers found out that Patriarch Reginald died in the Larkinson Clan's custody, Ves seriously doubted whether they would remain friendly!

#### *Chapter 3195: Death or Glory*

Ves regretted the creation of the Aspect of Transcendence. He should have never acted upon one of his inspirations and created a fourth organic statue that was meant to isolate and amplify the strongest obsessions of people subjected to its glow.

It would have been a different story if he succeeded in making it work, but so far the cleaning bots had to sanitize the testing chambers so many times that the blood had seeped into their circuits.

Of all of the test subjects that Ves had the pleasure of subjecting to his experiments, he never worked with such a high-quality expert pilot.

There was no doubt that out of every expert pilot in the expeditionary fleet, Patriarch Reginald Cross was undisputedly the most powerful of them all. The resonance meters all hovered at around 55 lavers in the few times he deployed with his Bolvar Rage. This was close to the upper limit of expert pilots and made him eligible to undergo a second evolution.

Yet for all of his efforts, Reginald never managed to make any progress over time. No matter what he tried, the resonance meters had not gone over 55 lavers at all in the span of a year.

This was a sign of stagnation and signified that the leader may have exhausted his natural potential a long time ago. This was why he said his talent was not as good as his father.

The only way for him to make meaningful progress was to resort to external pressure. The traditional solution had always been to drop into a battle and hope that everything worked out, but this was an exceedingly risky and reckless proposition.

Ves actually found it quite novel for Reginald and Benedict to come up with the idea of using the Aspect of Transcendence as a more convenient alternative. If it works the way that the pair expected it to, then it could present every desperate mech pilot with a more direct source of stimulation without endangering anyone else.

To certain kinds of people who valued power, attainment and success over their lives, the price of failure was not unacceptable to them! Ambitious individuals such as Patriarch Reginald were already accustomed to putting their lives on the line. Facing an unknown statue with a history of executing the unworthy was not that much a worse prospect.

It was still a troublesome request, though. Ves wouldn't mind if Patriarch Reginald wanted to die, but the problem was that Ves and his clan didn't want to attract any blame for the expert pilot's untimely death!

Just like Ves, Reginald played a crucial role in keeping the Cross Clan together. He was such a forceful and impressive figurehead that the Cross Clan would definitely descend into chaos if the heir and son of Saint Hemmington Cross died in a macabre experiment rather than perish gloriously on the battlefield!

The Golden Skull Alliance would definitely get messed up as a consequence. Ves could not allow this pivotal figure to throw away his life!

"Aren't you being too hasty, Reginald? You are making way too many assumptions here. First, who says you can't progress any further at this stage? Ace pilots never tend to be young. You may have grown older, but you still have plenty of years left in your life as long as you are able to receive at least one round of life-prolonging treatment."

"It's not that simple, young man." The expert pilot shook his head. "There are ways to extend the lifespan of my body, but it is a lot harder to ensure my will remains sharp. My goal isn't to maintain my current level of strength. My goal is to surpass it. Seeking ways to preserve and prolong my life will not bring me closer to my real goal. How else do you think that there are so few ace pilots in existence? In the Garlen Empire, we expert pilots all know that to achieve greatness, you must have the bearing of a great warrior. Letting time pass by while taking your time to become stronger does not conform with the standards of someone who is eligible to become an ace pilot."

"I see."

Mech pilots had it much harder than mech designers.



The latter was mostly an intellectual occupation that did not impose any heavy demands on fitness and fighting capabilities. This granted the mech industry a much greater tolerance to those who advanced when they were older than the average.

This was not necessarily the case for the former. Age was correlated with all sorts of variables that affected combat effectiveness. Even if piloting mechs was not as physical as swinging a sword in person, there were still many biological factors such as reaction time that still played crucial roles in determining overall performance.

Reginald's chances of breaking through would continue to drop over time. Even if the Cross Patriarch managed to succeed in his later years, there was not as much meaning to an ace pilot who already had a foot in his grave.

"I still have doubts about whether this is viable at all." Ves said. "The Aspect of Transcendence has never yielded a positive result. You chalk that up to the quality of test subjects that I have used, but the results aren't necessarily different if someone better comes forward. This is all untested and this will remain this way because I will not betray the people we are tasked to protect."

This firm response earned a rare look of approval from Patriarch Reginald. "I think the same way, so I will only make the attempt myself. I alone shall bear the price of my decision!"

This was false! Didn't Patriarch Reginald release that he would be doing his clan a great disservice by dying early and abruptly without preparing a suitable successor? Though he wrapped up his words with noble-sounding intentions, the expert pilot was only thinking about himself!

It appeared the apple did not fall too far from the tree. Saint Hemmington Cross had also been consumed by his self-centered views. Ves shouldn't have expected that the deceased ace pilot's son had learned enough lessons.

Ves let out a sigh. "Look, if you really insist, then I won't stop you any further, but at least we should do this properly. I admit that I have at least some belief that the Aspect of Transcendence can induce breakthroughs, but it does so in a very invasive and forceful manner. Those who fall short in any way will fail in the most gruesome manner possible."

"It may be the case that your Aspect of Transcendence is only effective to those who are already close to breaking through." Professor Benedict suggested. "From what you have told us, the test subjects that you have experimented on before are sub-standard individuals who are most certainly nowhere close to advancing to a greater stage. Your statue's glow had to do too much work in order to make them improve, and due to their inferior cognitions, they were incapable of withstanding the rapid buildup of pressure."



That was quite an extensive deduction considering that the Senior Mech Designer shouldn't have access to any details! If Ves didn't know any better, he would have thought that Professor Benedict was the one performing this experiment!

"That's a nice theory, but we have no idea whether it is accurate. We should be a bit more careful in making assumptions here, especially when we are dealing with a deadly subject. We can never be too careful."

The professor grinned like a shark. "On the contrary, young man! We should be bolder and explore the truth even harder. The greater the extreme, the greater the results! Something that induces so much danger is bound to be remarkable in a way. In order to harness it, we merely have to find the right solutions. It is inevitable that we must make some hard choices in order to achieve progress, but that is what separates true inventors from those who wish they were as successful as us. Face it, Ves. You are eager to try your experimental creation on an expert pilot, am I correct?"

"I..."

"You don't have to lie. If I were in your shoes, I would have tried to march Patriarch Reginald to the lab straight away. It is not every day you get to conduct a study involving an expert pilot."

Ves clutched Lucky against his body and frowned. Though he identified himself in the professor's words, that did not mean he liked it when he was being pressed in this manner!

"What I feel and what I desire has nothing to do with what is necessary. We Larkinsons always put duty and honor before greed and selfishness. Please don't lump me in the same category as you. We cannot be any further apart from each other. If you were indeed in my place, then the Aspect of Transcendence might have produced a bodycount that was a hundred if not a thousand times larger! The Larkinson Clan would have already come to an end if that was the case!"

Patriarch Reginald reached out with his hand and pressed the Senior Mech Designer back in his chair.

"Enough, Benedict. I am not here to discuss science with the two of you." The clan leader admonished before turning to Ves. "As for you, I have issued my request and I expect you to honor it. I shall wait and see if you are able to produce a masterwork expert mech for me. If you succeed, then you can forget about this. If you fail, then I will make sure that I shall succeed in your stead."

Ves wanted to palm his face. He was done with all of this nonsense. While he ordinarily welcomed anyone who volunteered to become his test subject, the latest person to step forward was too important to die under his care!

Expert pilots were so mule-headed that they became persistent sources of headache for Ves. Only a rare proportion of them managed to retain their common sense. The rest had become so warped by their extreme convictions that they literally thought that reality had to conform to their will rather than the other way around!

This was both the source of their extraordinary strength and the flaw that caused many of them to suffer from their self-inflicted wounds.

After a brief discussion, Ves finally had this tiring and stressful discussion with the Crosser leaders. He stormed back to his shuttle and waited for the vehicle to move away from the Hemmington Cross before letting down his guard.

"Goddammit!"

"Meow."

Lucky blinked as he floated next to Ves' head.

"Do you think that Patriarch Reginald has a chance of surviving this experiment?"

"Meow."

"Yeah, thought so. The Aspect of Transcendence should not be trifled with. Even I don't want to try out its glow."

Ves suddenly recalled an important detail. Back when he worked together with a Lifer biotechnician to create the statues, they used hastily-grown human clone tissue to form its organic composition.

"Wasn't it supposed to last three months at most?"

A lot more time had passed since the Aspects of Lufa initially came into existence. By now, it should have turned into a rotting mess. Yet Ves never heard anything about his old products decaying to such an extent.

When Ves returned to the Spirit of Bentheim, he headed straight to his workshop and entered the locked compartment where he had stashed all four Aspects of Lufa.

"They're... they're still alive!"

All four organic statues looked as pure and pristine as the day he initially created them. The low-quality human tissue that made up their flesh and other organic features did not show any sign of aging or breaking down.

"How is this possible?"

When Ves inspected the organic statues with his spiritual senses, he slowly widened his eyes. He even took a few steps back in shock. What he discovered was such a huge surprise that he even felt a surge of fear coursing through his spine!

In his spiritual vision, the organic matter that covered all four statues were glowing with power. They were so tightly infused with spiritual energy that it was as if their flesh had transcended the limitations of ordinary human tissue!

"Monsters!"

*Chapter 3196: Empowered Aspects*

"How...?"

Ves was utterly shocked at what he was looking at. How could the Four Aspects of Lufa defy their own expiration date and remain alive long after they reached their natural lifespan?

"Meow?"

Lucky floated around Ves as if he was an orbiting moon. The cat looked confused. Why was Ves making a big deal about these statues? Didn't they look the same as before?

"That's exactly what's the problem!" Ves shouted to his cat. "They're not supposed to look the same! Their lifespan was three months! Even if there is a bit of wiggle room to that estimate due to the influence of different variables, they shouldn't have lasted more than five months at most! They should have been in their graves already!"

This was a new and unknown phenomena that happened right under his nose! Who knew what his statues had turned into after months of precipitation.

At first, Ves remained on guard. He kept his distance and carefully scanned and observed the four statues with care and patience.

His instincts never warned him of any threat, and nothing shot out towards him or anything. It became increasingly clear that his fears of facing monsters of his own making were overblown.

"Why did I freak out? These aren't even mechs. They're just statues!"

The Aspects of Lufa differed substantially from his ordinary mechs by how they were able to move.

His mechs contained all of the internal mechanical parts necessary to move their limbs. They could even fly if they were equipped with a flight system.

In contrast, the statues in front of him shouldn't even be able to move! Though he did produce variants of some of the statues that were built like bots on the inside, those were just disposable decoys that had all been eliminated. The only ones left were the original ones sitting right in this compartment!

Once Ves confirmed that the statues were completely inanimate and did not pose a threat to him, he relaxed a bit and began to approach this case as an investigation.

First head to find out what exactly happened to them while they were lying in storage.

Ves first called up the security footage from the monitoring system and rapidly skimmed through many days of no activity. No one had sneaked up to the statues to tamper with them or anything. That ruled out the possibility of a third party deliberately messing with the organic tissue.

He then performed a more thorough scan on the statues. He moved closer and began to float around all four statues while holding his Vulcaneye as it performed a thorough investigation of their physical makeup.

"Interesting."

The solid inner base that was made out of inorganic materials was completely normal. The human tissue that had been molded to the exterior were also largely identical to normal samples.

There was just one strange point. The organic tissue remained at the peak of their health. While this was not particularly impressive for ordinary cloned biological matter, what made this case a lot weirder was that any biomatter only maintained their optimal condition for a relatively limited period of their natural lifespan.

This was especially the case for organic tissue that was not supported by an active replenishment system such as a human body or a biomech!

Since the Aspects of Lufas weren't biomechs, they didn't contain any mechanisms to regenerate or replenish aging and decaying biomatter. The cells should have exhausted themselves and dried out akin to dead skin cells.

Yet for some inexplicable reason, the cells of the Aspects of Lufa appeared as if they were never affected by the passage of time!

It was as if with each day that passes, the cells acted as if they were in a time loop or something.

Ves clutched one his hands through his hair as he tried to figure out the logic behind this unexplainable phenomenon. "It doesn't make any sense!"

While he wasn't a biotech researcher, he didn't need to consult Dr. Ranya to know that low-quality biomatter shouldn't have lasted this long. Even his scanner told him that the tissue was likely 'only' 17 days old.

"Seventeen days my butt! It's been a year since I departed from the Life Research Association!"

If the situation wasn't so frighteningly unknown, he would have felt a bit more elated at discovering a real instance of rejuvenation or functional immortality.

As it was, Ves did not like it when his products — especially his more dangerous ones — were subject to unknown influences that changed and mutated them in unpredictable directions!

"I don't have a problem with my products growing stronger, but I haven't anticipated any of this!"

Ves began to speculate what might have caused the flesh of the Aspects to become rejuvenated.

He couldn't help but think back on how life-prolonging treatments worked. These expensive and exclusive procedures relied heavily on serums that were produced in such a way that they contained an abundant amount of universal life-attributed spiritual energy.

If someone had injected a lot of raw serum into the organic tissue of the Aspects of Lufa, then Ves would have accepted that explanation. However, there were no signs that an unknown party had ever done that.

"There's no reason for anyone to squander expensive serum on a quartet of cheap organic statues that I can easily reproduce!"

The Four Aspects of Lufa may be the first organic totems that he had ever made, but they weren't particularly special when it came to their design and physical composition. He used bog-standard materials that were conveniently on hand during the time he was stuck on the surface of Prosperous Hill VI.

He did not insert any special ingredients in their structures like he did with the statue of the Superior Mother.

Ves inserted several unique and spiritually significant ingredients in the latter that allowed it to birth a powerful new ancestral spirit. All of the abnormalities that took place with the statues such as the fact that it drew an unexpected lightning storm could all be explained by the remarkable ingredients he used as well as the intervention of his powerful mother.

Yet what about the four statues? Ves didn't recall putting in any serum or other extravagant ingredients. The only design spirit that was connected to them was Lufa.

Was he the source of all of the changes?

That was a worrisome thought. His spiritual products as well as his natural design spirits generally didn't mess with reality.

For one, it was quite difficult and costly for them to reach beyond the spiritual realm and affect the material realm directly. Unless they had a very good reason and lots of spiritual energy to squander, they usually didn't bother to show up and instead focused on their own growth.

The instance where the Superior Mother descended onto the workshop in order to bless the fetus growing in Gloriana's belly was already an extravagant move!

Yet it was this move that Ves was currently thinking about when he tried to come up with an explanation of what happened to the statues.

"Did Lufa empower the Four Aspects in a similar fashion?"

It sounded plausible, if unlikely. Lufa's spiritual domain wasn't based on life, so his spiritual energy affected matter in a different way. Perhaps his purity was able to rejuvenate organic matter but that sounded extremely unlikely.

He decided that the best way for him to get some answers was to get them directly from the most likely subject!

Ves concentrated his mind and began to contact the design spirit through his Spirituality. Once he established a line, he wordlessly conveyed his question.

Lufa did not react with surprise of what had happened to the Four Aspects that were based around him. As the source of their glows, he had to have been aware of what was going on with the statues.

"You really didn't mess with them in a particular way?"

The design spirit firmly stuck to that story. Ves didn't think that Lufa was lying. The act was against the spiritual product's nature and it was hard to hide dishonesty through a direct spiritual connection.

After asking a number of related questions, Ves reluctantly concluded that the Angel of Tranquility hadn't tampered with the statues in any way.

"Then how did these statues manage to remain in such a youthful condition?"

Lufa supplied Ves with an answer that sounded unbelievable.

"Say again?"

Ves already heard it the first time and Lufa was not the sort of spirit to lie or joke around. He just couldn't accept what he heard.

According to the design spirit himself, the Four Aspects of Lufa became empowered through the worship they received from many different people.

"This..."

Ves recalled how he had utilized the statues during his time on Prosperous Hill VI. He made heavy use of the Aspect of Tranquility and Aspect of Healing to treat and soothe the Lifer refugees who had become victims to the civil war that broke out in the Life Research Association.

Though it had been a long time since he left the place behind, many of the Lifers who originally basked in the glows of the different statues still retained their memories of what it was like to experience the sensations.

If Lufa's answer was correct, then these survivors were not only reminiscing about the experience, but also showing their gratitude to the Aspects by worshipping them as if they were divine!

"This is crazy!"

The Four Aspects may have profoundly changed their lives for the better, but these stupid people didn't have to go as far as to worship the tools that treated their traumas!

To Ves, it sounded as stupid as worshipping a fire extinguisher just because it saved them from getting burned. A tool was a tool and even if the statues were organic and alive in a sense didn't mean that they were anything greater!

He did not dare to accept this conclusion for now. He had way too little proof of what was actually going on. A single source, even one as credible as Lufa, could still be wrong due to perspective bias and limited understanding.

There were several incongruities with this simple answer.

First, how could the worship of several thousands or at most tens of thousands of average people lead to such a profound transformation to the Four Aspects?

They had not only changed from a physical perspective, but also a spiritual one! Each of them were a bit more 'alive' than before, and Ves had only seen this in mechs and objects that were being personally used by their respective pilots and owners.



Second, if misguided religious worship was related to their empowerment, then how come all four of the Aspects became empowered instead of just the two most public ones?

The Aspect of Tranquility and the Aspect of Healing were by far the ones that had been exposed most often to other people.

The Aspect of Rationality barely got any use at all and most people who were able to view the Aspect of Transcendence in person were already dead!

"Did the deaths of those test subjects feed the Aspect of Transcendence? Did I accidentally sacrifice human lives to fuel the growth of an unholy monstrosity?"

Ves shuddered. This was a ludicrous fantasy! He would have noticed if a notable amount of spiritual energy transferred from the exploding corpses to the Aspect of Transcendence.

"Could it be... that the worship generated from the slow but significant sales of the Sanctuary Treatment Editions directed back to the initial models?"

This was a more plausible explanation, though it still sounded unlikely. Any spiritual feedback generated by the satisfied patients that had been treated with the few Sanctuary variants that had been sold to various treatment institutions should have flowed directly to Lufa.

"None of these answers are sufficient."

If Ves wanted to get to the bottom of this phenomenon, he needed to conduct a more proper study.

He shrugged. "I don't have time for this. I'll just throw the Four Aspects onto Ranya's new secret research department and see what it can make out of them... I really want to know how their disposable organic matter is able to defy the passage of time."

#### *Chapter 3197: Stack of Bodies*

As soon as Ves decided to dump the Four Aspects of Lufa onto Ranya's lap, he quickly made the arrangements. He informed the doctor with a brief message and also packed up the statues into special containers before making sure they were shipped to the Dragon's Den with the use of bots.

He did not want any clansman getting close to any of the statues.

There was no question that the Aspect of Transcendence was fatal to anyone unfortunate enough to fall within the range of its glow.

What Ves was less certain about was whether the empowerment that the organic statues had gone through also affected the expressions of their glows. He did notice that they were stronger and more pronounced than what he remembered, but he was easily able to block their effects.

He had no idea whether someone who didn't possess his level of spiritual strength and resilience would get badly affected or not. He did not dare to presume that the Aspect of Tranquility and the Aspect of Healing were as benign as before. Even if his instincts and his own impression of them just now were positive, as a proper scientist Ves should not make any conclusions without obtaining definite proof.

Ves stuck around long enough to make sure that a swarm of automated bots slowly brought the statues out to the hangar bay while the route was temporarily cleared of personnel.

Once he became assured that no one was about to suffer an accident because they strayed too close to the Four Aspects, he returned to his main office and decided to leave this matter aside.

"I won't get any answers quickly and I have other business to take care of at the moment." He muttered.

"Meow." Lucky settled onto his desk and began to take a nap.

He was still concerned about the Four Aspects of Lufa because of its parallels to his own daughter. In both cases, a source of spiritual energy or other types of energy pumped into their physical forms, triggering a transformation that made them a lot more powerful while at the same time causing them to become more spiritually reactive.

This was a completely new form of spiritual empowerment that led to complete unknowns. Though he didn't think it was likely that they were harmful, it was best for Ves to make sure. This was why he sent them off to the Dragon's Den straight away.

Even if the researchers over there weren't able to study the more esoteric properties of the Four Aspects, they should at least figure out how the expirable organic tissue still remained alive and well.

"I wonder what this will mean for my daughter?"

Would her body essentially remain stuck as a baby once she was born? That would be an absolute tragedy and one that would definitely devastate Gloriana!

Ves vigorously shook his head. "The Superior Mother personally blessed my baby! She would never do something so cruel to her own granddaughter!"

The fetus had already grown by a lot since the Superior Mother did her business. There was no indication that his unborn daughter had stopped her physical development, so this theory was unlikely to be true.

"Well, I need more data first. All of this empty guesswork is pointless."

For now, he was willing to assume that his daughter's development remained healthy despite all of the spiritual empowerment she received. Ves might have no clue of what was going on, but the Superior Mother should know her craft. Raising kids was literally her job!

After he succeeded in setting aside his concerns this time, he tried his best to move on and summoned his core advisors to his office.

It took a bit of time for all of them to gather. Some of them were stationed on the Spirit of Bentheim and merely had to interrupt their original schedule to answer the call. Others had to leave their current ships and shuttle over to the factory ship because Ves insisted on holding this meeting in person.

Ves and the people who arrived earlier quietly waited as the latecomers finally arrived. The last one to arrive was Calabast. She sidled into the office with Arnold waddling in her wake with her long boots clacking against the metal deck as if she was playing an instrument. After a brief sweep of the office, she approached a couch and laid her body down as if she was in a lounge instead of a serious meeting.

"Squeak."

Arnold tried and failed to jump onto the couch. His chubby body and multitude of weak limbs weren't conducive to jumping.

Strangely enough, Calabast did not do anything to help her pet climb up. She simply looked at her pet with an expectant look.

Eventually, Arnold gave up his futile action and decided to get up through another method.

"Squeak!"

Ves snapped towards the arganid clisenta as he detected elevated spiritual activity in the exobeast's direction.

Much to his surprise, a dark corona surrounded Arnold's body for a moment before it split up into multiple versions of himself.

What was notable here was that each of them were stacked on top of each other!

This tower of exobeasts reached as high as a meter!

While it already showed signs of toppling over, the Arnold at the top happily plopped forward and landed on a soft cushion that automatically molded to his body.

"Squeak..."

The other Arnolds that made up the rest of the stack dissipated into black mist that quickly faded from existence.

"Good boy." Calabast grinned and reached out to scratch her mutated pet's furry back.

"Squeak~"

Suffice to say, everyone else in the room was quite shocked at the display. It wasn't every day that they saw such an abnormal display. If not for the fact that this wasn't even the weirdest phenomenon in the Larkinson Clan, the others would have long freaked out already!

"Calabast."

"Yes, kid?"

"Please secure this compartment."

"Isn't it secure enough already?"

"I just want to make absolutely sure this time."

"Fine, fine."

Calabast personally activated the security suite in the office and also deployed additional jammers and devices that offered another layer of insurance.

Though Ves was 99.99 percent sure that his security hadn't been breached, it was best to make sure considering the topic he was about to discuss with his fellow advisors.

"First off, thank you for attending this meeting in person. I know it can't be easy for you to drop what you were doing to answer my call."

This was the first time he gathered most of the top leaders of the clan for an important meeting. An impressive lineup of powerful Larkinsons who held most of the executive power in the clan were all paying a lot of respect to Ves. This made him feel pleased as it was a solid sign that he was still in charge.

The recently-appointed chief ministers sat directly in front of his desk. Chief Minister Magdalena, Chief Minister Novilon and Chief Minister Raymond had already made a name for themselves by starting up many initiatives that introduced a lot of welcome changes.

General Verle already had an inkling of what this meeting was about. It seemed that Ves could not go by for too long before landing in trouble again.

Shederin Purnesse could also tell that this meeting was of great importance. The old man's face already turned grave as he thought of what could cause Ves to take this matter so seriously.

As for Calabast, she was highly focused and alert right now despite her casual posture. The chubby exobeast that was currently enjoying her ministrations might look cute and harmless, but had actually grown a lot more powerful in recent times.

Ves briefly scanned Arnold with his spiritual senses, causing the living design spirit to feel as if he had been violated for a brief amount of time.

"Squeak!"

Interestingly enough, now that Ves knew what to look for, he also managed to detect a degree of spiritual empowerment from Arnold's physical state. The only difference was that it was hardly detectable in this case.

The implications were disturbing. A cubic centimeter of body tissue from his daughter contained much more concentrated spiritual energy than the same sample of flesh from the mutated beast.

What this actually meant, Ves wasn't sure, but he hoped that she retained enough humanity for him to regard her as a daughter rather than something else.

He mentally shook his head. He was being way too alarmist about this issue. He decided to resume the meeting.

"Ahem, As you may have guessed, I did not call you here to talk about trivial matters. A few hours ago, I visited the Hemmington Cross in order to hold a lovely little discussion with the patriarch and head designer of the Cross Clan. A couple of weighty topics came up that I think I should share with you. I can't figure this out myself so I need your help to get some answers."

Ves briefly summarized his visit to the Crossers. He relayed his meeting with Patriarch Reginald and Professor Benedict as best as possible.

The most difficult part in relaying his story was how he should address the Aspect of Transcendence. He eventually decided to skim over it and instead referred to a vague

experimental procedure that was exceedingly dangerous and had not yielded any success up to this point.

Once his advisors took in the story, they calmly mulled it over and sorted out their own thoughts.

General Verle spoke up first. "I've encountered my fair share of expert pilots, but Patriarch Reginald Cross is really something else. He's a damaged soldier. All expert pilots are damaged to an extent, but he has it worse than others. His twisted admiration and hero worship towards his father is driving him to chase after every possible means to catch up to Saint Hemmington's splendor. If he is crazy enough to think that one of your unproven and highly experimental procedures can turn him into an ace pilot, then he is truly beyond saving."

Many of the others nodded. They were all knowledgeable enough to know that expert pilots weren't exactly normal. They were defined by their obsessions and convictions. Sometimes, that led to rather wholesome characters like Joshua and sometimes this permanent shift produced deranged, mule-headed idiots like Venerable Ghanso.

If Ves created a spectrum and put Joshua and Ghanso at the opposite ends, then Patriarch Reginald would definitely fall close to the side marked by the deceased expert pilot!

"What I don't understand is why Professor Benedict Cortez has not raised any objections to this crazy-sounding scheme." Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson frowned. "The current Cross Patriarch is the pillar that supports the current Cross Clan. It would have never been able to make it this far without his strong personality. Although the worst has already passed, the Cross Clan is still in a fragile state and could easily disintegrate if he is gone."

"I think it is helpful to think about who would succeed Patriarch Reginald as the next clan leader if he is no longer fit to rule." Calabast spoke.

Ves slowly nodded. "The Cross Clan's culture is still shaped by the customs of the Garlen Empire. The expert pilots are always expected to be the leaders. Who else is there?"

"The Cross Clan currently has three expert pilots in total." Calabast answered. "Aside from the Cross Patriarch, there is Venerable Linda Cross and Venerable Imaris Cross. Neither of them are as prestigious, strong, forceful or commanding as their patriarch. Reginald is simply too strong and his blood relationship to an ace pilot grants him a lot of legitimacy. His prominence is so overpowering that the other two Crosser expert pilots seem much paler in comparison."

"Do you think that the Crossers will have trouble accepting the rule of either of them if Patriarch Reginald is gone?" Ves asked.

"Oh, I'm sure of it. Venerable Linda and Venerable Imaris are good fighters, but that doesn't make them capable leaders."

"Aren't we forgetting about someone here?" Shederin spoke up. "There is one more strong figure in the Cross Clan who may be able to gain control over it as long as Patriarch Reginald Cross is taken off the board. Who says that expert pilots have to be the ones in charge? Why can't a prominent leader such as Professor Benedict Cortez not assume leadership instead?"

"That's impossible! The Cross Clan would never respect someone who isn't an expert pilot or ace pilot!"

"Are you certain about that assumption?"

That was a good question.

#### *Chapter 3198: Cross Game*

The notion brought forward by Minister Shederin Purnesse sounded preposterous at first. Anyone who possessed even a sliver of familiarity with the Cross Clan knew that they were made up of a bunch of warriors who revered the strongest among them. With Saint Hemmington Cross as their greatest example, the Crossers all immersed themselves in a martial culture where only strength conveyed righteousness!

Therefore, the people attending the meeting did not seriously consider whether the guest designer that had recently been inducted in the Cross Clan was eligible to succeed Patriarch Reginald if the latter had passed away.

In the Garlen Empire back in the Vicious Mountain Star Sector, almost all of the citizens over there showed open disdain towards cerebral leaders who couldn't even beat a mouse. Their views on what kind of people made for good leaders had become so distorted that they directly equated piloting ability to good leadership!

It was a stupid mindset and one that Ves did not think would last. The Cross Clan should have ended with Saint Hemmington. He was the model example of how putting a meathead in charge was pure idiocy.

The fact that pretty much every single member of the Cross Clan still revered the deceased ace pilot to this day said everything about their ability to think critically and learn from the past.

Ves therefore found it very difficult to reconcile this negative impression of the Cross Clan with the notion that a mech designer could take it over.

"Shederin, why do you think that way?" He asked.



Everyone turned their attention to the former ambassador. The Purnesser calmly obliged and explained his reasoning.

"It is true that the Cross Clan is following the ways of the Garlen Empire, but it would be a great mistake to assume that it is still the same."

"First, this outlook has already failed them before." He raised a finger. "They had to have learned some lessons from the calamity that nearly ended their clan."

Shederin raised another finger. "Second, they are no longer in Vicious Mountain. As our fleet keeps traveling forward, the distance to their old home increases. This makes it increasingly more difficult to maintain the same values and customs as before. It becomes a lot easier to adopt the customs that are more common in their current surroundings."

He raised a third finger. "Finally, Professor Benedict Cortez is of much greater importance to the current Cross Clan than the alternatives. From my own observations, Venerable Linda Cross and Venerable Imaris Cross are not up to par. It will be difficult for them to command as much respect as their predecessors."

"I don't think you're wrong, but will the Crossers agree?" Ves questioned. "I don't think the clansmen will be able to accept the notion that they should turn to someone who isn't a fighter."

"Ah, but is that really true?" Shederin smiled. "Is Professor Benedict really as weak as you say? I think he shares a lot of traits in common with you, Patriarch Ves. Like you, he is a mech designer who is uncharacteristically able to project strength when necessary. Like you, he is an indispensable part of his organization because he is their main source of revenue. It is conceivable that the Crossers might look at the Larkinson Clan as an example of how a strong and capable mech designer can lead an organization into prosperity. If they decide that they want to pursue a similar future, then choosing a Senior Mech Designer over any of the expert pilots as their next leader might sound like a more viable option."

"When people get desperate, they tend to pay less attention to established rules and traditions." Calabast remarked. "Isn't that right, Ves?"

"Uhm, yeah." Ves lamely answered. "Will the Cross Clan really be driven to such a state, though? Even if Patriarch Reginald disappears, the rest of the Cross Clan will be okay, right?"

No one could say for sure.

"The Cross Clan has undergone several major changes since they have joined the Golden Skull Alliance." Shederin said. "Not only has it shifted into a nomadic, space-faring clan that is not attached to any fixed territories, the clan has also taken in tens of

thousands of foreigners and inducted them into the clan with the help of their 'kinship network'. Think about what this can do. Both steer the clan away from its former identity. At some point, the changes may go far enough that it is no longer unthinkable to allow a Senior Mech Designer to gain acceptance."

"Acceptance won't come naturally." His son Novilon added. "Professor Benedict must actively lay the groundwork to convince the Crossers to break tradition. He will have to contact all of the stakeholders in the clan and win over a majority of them to induce a change. He should also be working on encouraging Venerable Linda and Venerable Imaris to comply with this unprecedented change. If either of them objects, then they can instantly rally a large number of Crossers against the Senior's takeover attempt. The conflict might get very bloody very quickly, and that will most certainly lead to grievous losses to both sides. If Professor Benedict is aware of this, then he will not commit to any action that will lead to a lose-lose situation."

Ves and everyone else thought about what the Purnessers had said. Their vision on this potential power struggle was much further ahead than anyone else in the compartment. Even Calabast looked thoughtful.

There were still a lot of questions. Too much about this scenario is based on spurious deductions. There wasn't enough evidence that any of this might take place.

"Does Professor Benedict really want to take over the Cross Clan?" General Verle skeptically asked. "In my opinion, the downsides far outweigh the gains. Not only does he have to be responsible for everything, but it will take an unreasonable amount of effort to tame the unruly Crossers. No matter how much he is able to manipulate them into accepting his leadership, the Crossers are still Crossers. They won't be able to shake off the sense that they should have appointed a genuine Crosser expert pilot instead of a mech designer who only entered the picture relatively recently."

Ves nodded in agreement. "I think the same way. I know first-hand how troublesome it is to manage an entire clan. While the control is nice, there is just too much stuff going on. A Senior should mainly focus on working towards Master."

"Maybe the professor needs more resources." Raymond suggested. "From what I know of high-ranking mech designers, they need to have access to an increasing amount of funding, resources, equipment and manpower. If the Cross Clan is reluctant to provide him with these expensive demands, then he might choose to take over the clan just so that he can fulfill his own demands."

That was a viable answer, though Ves wasn't sure whether Professor Benedict was truly the sort of person who would do that. The Senior's current position in the Cross Clan was already high. There was little need to acquire more power unless he had more changes in mind.

Magdalena raised another point. "If Professor Benedict is truly plotting to take over the clan, shouldn't Patriarch Reginald himself be aware of what his resident mech designer is doing? Why would the Cross Patriarch tolerate such open ambition from someone who doesn't fit the bill of a proper leader in his clan?"

That was a good question. Ves had met Patriarch Reginald enough times to know that while the expert pilot was very mule-headed, he was not someone who was too ignorant.

In his meeting with the two Cross leaders, the relationship between them appeared to be relatively harmonious. While they had their differences, they mostly formed a united front.

What was going on over there?

"I think... Even if Patriarch Reginald thinks that Professor Benedict is up to something, it wouldn't be so easy to break their relationship." Ves guessed. "The former relies heavily on the latter to design his expert mech. While the Cross Patriarch also wants my help, I cannot design an expert mech by myself, let alone a high-tier one. The participation of a competent and trusted Senior is an indispensable part of the plan."

"You know what? I think this case is an open conspiracy." Calabast concluded.

"An open conspiracy?" Magdalena frowned.

"It's just like a regular conspiracy, but known to both sides instead of being kept secret. Let's say that Professor Benedict wants to become the leader of the Cross Clan for some reason. He might have raised the topic of Ves' experimental procedure to the Cross Patriarch as a deliberate attempt to create a vacancy."

"Shouldn't this trap be obvious? Even if Patriarch Reginald isn't able to see it, surely the other people by his side must recognize the danger in pursuing this option."

So what if Patriarch Reginald knows that this is a trap of sorts?" Calabast smirked.

"According to our personality profile on him, he cannot resist the temptation of grasping the chance to advance to ace pilot. If Reginald succeeds, then he will win the game and the Cross Clan will restore the glory of the past. If the expert pilot dies in the attempt, then Professor Benedict will take advantage of the leadership vacuum and take over the clan and lead it into a different direction. Either way, the Cross Clan will likely become even more prosperous than now, so the clansmen will definitely be better off. This assurance will make Patriarch Reginald feel at ease."

Ves thought it quite sad that Patriarch Reginald thought he wouldn't be able to do his clan justice if he remained as his current self. What was wrong about being a high-tier expert pilot? He was already stronger than nearly every expert pilot in human space!

Was it truly necessary for the Cross Clan to be led by an ace pilot again? It was doing just fine at the moment!

"These Crossers are total nutcases if they agree to go along with such a bet." He resentfully said. "A high-tier expert pilot is a treasure to any organization. How can they allow one to gamble with their lives in such a risky gamble? If Patriarch Reginald dies, the Crossers will only have two expert pilots left. That is not enough!"

"It all comes down to what Patriarch Reginald Cross wants for himself." Shederin Purnesse sighed. "Unlike you, Patriarch Ves, he is not as considerate to others. His views and decisions are solely centered around himself. He may feel compelled to protect the Cross Clan, but this is a responsibility that had been thrust into his hands due to unfortunate circumstances. His real goal has always been to become an ace pilot. He is willing to set aside everything including the traditions of his clan and his own life just to gain a chance of attaining greatness."

"Death or glory." General Verle spoke. "The warriors that adhere to this creed never live long enough to reach old age. Their ultimate aim has always been to become a god pilot and become the strongest warrior in reality. They make for the most powerful pillars of support if they think they are successful, but they can easily trigger disasters if they start to become desperate."

"Well, that sounds nice." Ves sarcastically said. "What should we do in response to this crazy development? I don't want a bomb to explode next door one day!"

"I don't think we necessarily have to do anything, Ves." Calabast said as she ruffled Arnold's furry sides. "Our clan has been overtaking the Cross Clan for a while now. If this goes on, our allies will eventually be left in the dust and the Golden Skull Alliance will no longer have as much meaning. If we want to maintain a viable coalition, then why not let the Crossers play out their game?"

Calabast raised a good point.

Shederin nodded. "If Patriarch Reginald succeeds, then he will owe us a great amount of gratitude due to the assistance that you have provided. Our clan will enjoy the protection of a powerful ace pilot for a very long time, which is a luxury that few pioneers enjoy in the Red Ocean."

"And if Professor Benedict Cortez takes over the clan, then he will fix most of the deficiencies that hold it back and turn it closer to something akin to our own clan." Novilon Purnesse grinned. "Sure, the Cross Clan will become a stronger economic power under the lead of a Senior, but as long as Professor Benedict is friendly to us, we will have a stronger ally that is much more rational than before."

"Hmmm..."

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin... Was it really so bad to allow the former Skull Architect to take control of a powerful military clan? The idea sounded wrong at first, but perhaps he was being unfair to the reformed Senior Mech Designer.

#### *Chapter 3199: Honorable Conduct*

"Expert pilots are always hard to deal with, but you can usually manage them as long as you keep them away from anything important." General Verle said. "This isn't possible here. When the expert pilot is the highest authority of a clan, then there isn't anyone else who can rein him in. Cases like these easily illustrate why we rarely elevate demigods to leaders. They are too self-centered for their own good."

"It's part of their DNA." Chief Minister Magdalena concurred. "They work harder than anyone else and their resolve is inhumanly strong. Expert pilots have to possess an unflinching confidence in themselves. The moment they begin to doubt their abilities is the moment when their upward momentum stalls. From what it sounds like, Patriarch Reginald is already inching closer to this point. He knows what it will mean for his future progress, so he has become quite desperate for a solution."

All of this meant that Patriarch Reginald Cross was unlikely to change his mind. Even if his radical decisions could lead to a great upheaval within his clan, he didn't let that stop him from pursuing his own desires. In fact, the expert pilot rationalized that his extreme actions would ultimately benefit his clan despite the immense risks he incurred.

"You know, Patriarch Ves, you have a huge influence in the outcome of this foolhardy attempt." Calabast said as she held Arnold in her lap and casually squished his cheeks. "There are two instances where you can play a role. First, you can try to make a masterwork mech or deliberately aim to keep it normal. Second, you are in complete control over the experimental procedure that you have developed. I can't tell how successful you are in making either of them succeed, but you can definitely ensure that Patriarch Reginald will fail without letting anyone grow suspicious."

Ves frowned. "What are you saying?"

She smirked. "If you believe that an idiot like Patriarch Reginald is unsuited to lead an allied clan, then why not make sure that he will exit stage? Just look at the history of the Cross Clan. The emergence of an ace pilot only temporarily benefited the Cross Clan. The same ace pilot possessed awful judgement and was way too caught up in his power for his good. His enormous failure almost led to the extinction of his clan. Do you really want to see a repeat when his son reprises his father's worst traits if he succeeds in becoming an ace pilot?"

This was an important consideration. Though Ves was sure that the Cross Clan at least learned some lessons from its calamitous fall, it was quite doubtful whether the Crossers were truly willing to recognize the faults of the late Saint Hemmington Cross.

Would helping Patriarch Reginald break through his bottleneck truly trigger a second fall? One that might not just end the Cross Clan, but also drag the Larkinson Clan down as well?

Since both clans were journeying together in the same fleet, any trouble that the Crossers incurred would also affect the Larkinsons and vice versa. Ves had a feeling that Patriarch Reginald wouldn't pay too much attention to such matters when he gained more power than ever.

While several other Larkinsons put serious thought in this suggestion, others objected to the idea.

"What you are suggesting is dishonorable!" Chief Minister Magdalena sternly insisted. "When someone asks for our help or requests our service, we should work honestly and do everything we can to fulfill expectations. How can we possibly build trust and camaraderie among our allies and partners if we act insincerely? We are Larkinsons, not Vrakens, madame. Do not mistake our identity."

Both Magdalena and Calabast glared at each other. They obviously held different stances and could not see eye to eye on this matter.

"I am on Magdalena's side on this." Ves spoke up. "I am a mech designer. It is my job to serve mech pilots. While Patriarch Reginald's requests are rather difficult and unorthodox, that does not change the fact that I have an obligation to meet his needs to the best of my capacity. This is my principle and a principle that every mech designer should adhere to. I am not going to sandbag in either of those instances."

He was being very serious about this. His tone sounded so definitive that Calabast decided not to argue further.

Whether Patriarch Reginald would become better or worse when he advanced to ace pilot was not in his consideration. Ves just didn't want to stoop so low as to screw over his clients who earnestly sought his service.

Ves expected the same from Professor Benedict Cortez. Becoming a Senior was much more important to him than gaining a temporary advantage due to pulling off a dirty move. Master Mech Designers were above such sordid moves. If the older mech designer ever wanted to become one himself, then he should at least clean up his behavior.

Since Ves decided to act with sincerity, there wasn't much to talk about anymore. There was little else they could do because Patriarch Reginald was too intractable to change his mind. The best the Larkinsons could do was to keep an eye on the Cross Clan and make sure they were prepared for anything that might happen.



"If the Cross Clan really descends into chaos, we may have to go in and restore order ourselves." General Verle said in an ominous tone. "We have no way of knowing how bad it can get, but if we consider the Crossers to be our brothers, then we have an obligation to lend them a hand."

"Let us hope it won't come to that."

The meeting ended and everyone went back to their respective ships or stations. Calabast and her pet decided to stick around a little longer, though.

While Arnold was running around the office while inspecting every ornament and piece of furniture, Calabast sauntered forward and leaned against Ves' desk. She reached out her hand and softly patted her palm onto Lucky's dozing form.

"Meow..."

"Heh, I miss your cat quite a lot. It's incredible what he is capable of, you know. If you leave him with me, I can make much better use of him than you ever will."

Ves shook his head. "Lucky is off-limits. You can loan him but he's not yours. He has even more uses than serving as a hacking tool."

"Fine, fine. As long as I can borrow him every now and then, my life would already be much easier."

He turned to observe Arnold scurrying about. The exobeast had grown a bit more powerful since the last time Ves laid eyes on the creature. The transformations taking place inside the mutated beast's body were also signs of progress.

Where it led to, Ves wasn't sure, but a stronger Arnold was able to provide a lot more assistance to the Larkinsons than a weaker Arnold.

"How is your pet coming along?"

"Well, he's grown smarter and more... human, I would say."

"Oh?"

"Arnold was already quite smart to begin with, but he has grown even further away from just a beast." Calabast clarified. "I'm trained to analyze and predict human behavior. It's essential in my line of work. Do you know what I see when I study my pet? He's becoming a little less of a beast every day. He is able to control his instincts to a greater degree and he is fully capable of understanding complex human instructions. I am curious how far this improvement will go. Will he surpass us humans in terms of intelligence?"



"Intelligence is difficult to define. Perhaps Arnold might indeed become smarter than us in some aspects, but I doubt he will be able to surpass us on all fronts. He's still an alien beast at heart."

"Maybe you're right. I'll make sure to continue my observations on Arnold."

After they finished talking about their pets, Calabast decided to bring up a more serious topic.

"Ves?"

"Yes?"

"Have you made a decision on what your stance towards the Hexers will be after the Red Ocean?" She asked. "While the Hexers are on our side, they are not always sincere in the way they do things. You need to make the right decision going forward. Our clan should not be beholden to the Hexers. I did not quit DIVA and parted ways with the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty only to continue associating with them in the Larkinson Clan."

Ves raised his eyebrows. "I thought a Hexer like you would be glad to have like minded company at your side."

"I haven't identified myself with the Hexers for a very long time, kid. I am glad that we have distanced ourselves from the Hexadric Hegemony, but its people are still around us. The Glory Seekers will continue to exert an adverse influence on you, your wife and the rest of our clan. They're not good company, Ves."

He sighed. "I know."

"Then follow my suggestion and kick them aside before we reach the Red Ocean."

"I can't do that, Calabast. Gloriana won't like that at all and I owe too much to her dynasty to repay their kindness with such an ungrateful move."

"Ves, Ves, Ves. This isn't the time for you to be soft." Calabast tutted and shook her head. "Compared to before, our situation is vastly different nowadays. We have grown powerful enough to take care of ourselves. We no longer need to depend on the professional soldiers of the Glory Seekers to win our battles. They're leeching from us at this point. Perhaps you think that is their just reward for assisting us when we were weak, but there are more ways you can repay your debts to the Wodins and the Hexers than tolerate their presence."

Ves grimaced. "Let's not go that far too soon. I have a different idea in mind on how to handle the Glory Seekers. We still have time until we reach the Red Ocean. Once we have firmly left the Milky Way behind, it will become a lot easier for us to change our

relationship with the Glory Seekers. The main problem is finding a solution that does not upset my wife too much."

"Well, good luck with that, Ves. You're asking for the impossible. If I were in your shoes, I would cut my losses. It might not be nice to act like a scumbag, but you and the rest of our clan would be much better off in the long run if the Hexers aren't constantly trying to cling to us like an overly possessive wife. There are many other groups and factions in the Red Ocean that are more worth it for us to associate with. They don't come with problematic baggage either."

He sighed. If he had a choice, he would have never chosen to associate with the Hexers either, but his life led him onto a different path.

Calabast was right that Ves had already gotten what he wanted from the Hexers for the most part. As long as he designed two more mechs for them, he would complete his obligations to their people and state. If not for the presence of the Glory Seekers, he would have been able to make a clean break with the women.

In fact, there was something else that Ves hadn't mentioned to his spymaster. The Superior Mother was also intertwined with the Hexer people. If Ves wanted to make sure the ancestral spirit was fine, then he needed to make sure the Hexer people did not stray away from admiring his mother.

The only way for him to ease his concerns on this matter was to spread the Superior Mother to other states and cultures. Yet this was bound to be a difficult task as the Superior Mother was not an easy design spirit to work with for people without a Hexer background.

"Let's wait until we pass through the final portal." Ves reiterated. "A new galaxy should allow us to make a new start."

"I hope you'll be ready to make the necessary decision by then." Calabast said as she pushed herself away from his desk. "Let's go, Arnold. We're done here."

"Squeak."

#### *Chapter 3200: Fabrication Order*

Before they were ready to embark on their upcoming fabrication attempt, the mech designers briefly had to decide which one they should tackle first.

"The fabrication of the Decapitator Project will be a high-profile event that will take place in front of lots of clansmen." Gloriana began. "If we succeed in turning it into our second masterwork expert mech, then we would gain a lot of benefits which will doubtlessly help us elevate the quality of the Vanguard Project."

"Our chances of success are too low, though." Ves frowned. "I don't want to blow your bubble, but our last attempt was a fluke. Even if we are pulling out all of the stops today, I don't think we have improved our odds sufficiently enough for us to assume that we will succeed again this time. What do you think, Ketis?"

The Swordmaster looked solemn. "You're more qualified than me, Ves. I only made one masterwork, and I only played a marginal role back then. You know much more than me. If you think that our odds of success still won't be enough, then you must have your reasons to think that way."

Gloriana furrowed her brows. "You should have more confidence in your work, Ketis! Out of every expert mech design project, the Decapitator Project aligns with you the most. You contributed more to it than with any other expert mech. If you want what is best for Venerable Dise, then you should always aim for the top no matter the odds!"

Ves reluctantly agreed. "She's right, Ketis. This is the closest thing to a passion project to you now. While your design experience and refinement are not the best, don't worry too much about it as we can cover that aspect. You just focus on channeling your passion and making the Decapitator Project an expert mech that you can be proud of after you finish it. Just imagine you are fighting a powerful opponent. Just because the odds are stacked against you doesn't mean you are destined to lose. At least put up a fight so that you won't have any regrets."

Ketis firmed up after she heard this. Her force of will became sharper and more focused again. "Thank you, Ves. I needed this lesson. I'm as ready as I can be, though in my opinion I would feel a little more confident if I can gain some additional experience. If we are able to work on the Vanguard Project first, I can learn some crucial lessons that I missed out on back when we put together the Amaranto."

Last time, they worked on an expert rifleman mech, which was too far removed from her interests. While a spearman mech was not completely in her tastes, it had a lot in common with swordsman mechs. Working on an expert melee mech was good practice that would definitely allow her to be more prepared.

"So we've decided, then?" Ves crossed his arms. "We'll fabricate the Vanguard Project first before we start with the Decapitator Project?"

Juliet had a different opinion. "Making any expert mech is a huge and stressful job. A week between fabrication runs might not be enough for us to regain our peak condition. We are all fresh right now but we might not be that way anymore after we complete the Vanguard Project. If its quality turns out to be worse than we expected, then we would not be in a good mood by the time we make the Decapitator Project."

She raised a good point, but Ves was willing to gamble that the increased experience was enough of a benefit to allow Ketis to make a greater contribution later on. She played a pivotal role in reforging and reshaping the Decapitator Project's greatsword.

Her practical experience was too little that any additional fabrication attempts would lead to noticeable improvements.

Gloriana held this opinion as well. "We will work first on the Vanguard Project. While both projects are similar in terms of complexity and orientation, the fact of the matter is that we have someone who is highly passionate about swordsman mechs in our team. That gives the Decapitator Project a better chance of turning into a great machine. Don't get me wrong. I don't dislike the Vanguard Project. It just isn't anyone's favorite expert mech."

Every mech designer had favorites. Ves cared the most about the Chimera Project. Juliet was quite proud about the Dark Zephyr. Gloriana favored the Bulwark Project. Ketis obviously adored the Decapitator Project.

However, that did not mean that the remaining two expert mechs had no chance. The Amaranto was no one's favorite either and through a series of improbable events turned out to be far greater than anyone had expected.

The Journeymen thought deeply on what was best. Eventually, the majority chose to go with the Vanguard Project first.

"It's uncertain whether all of the factors that we've brought up will apply, but one thing is for sure. Ketis will definitely do a better job if she gains more practical experience." Gloriana decided.

This meant that the Swordmaidens and Heavensworders would have plenty of time to plan out and prepare their ritual ceremony. Since it was supposed to last for as long as it took to fabricate the Decapitator Project, this news allowed them to devise a much more elaborate show.

Whether it would all help was still in question. A part of Ves thought that this senseless theater wouldn't yield any qualitative better results. Another part of him expected that at least something might happen.

In his experience, When a large number of like-minded people gathered together, their collective energy tended to coalesce into a faint but noticeable influence.

Could it really help in creating a masterwork?

"The more elaborate the ritual, the more definitive the results."

He was willing to try, and so was everyone else. They had all become so addicted to making masterwork mechs that they were willing to try out crazy ideas just to feel that unique rush yet again.

Ves recognized that this was not a correct mindset. Masterworks should be the exception rather than the rule for mech designers of their caliber. Building up unrealistic expectations wouldn't do them any good in the long run.

Once they decided to start with the Vanguard Project, the Journeymen took one day to set everything up and adjust their mentalities.

Since Gloriana's workshop had been emptied out, the Journeymen decided to make the Vanguard Project in Ves' workshop instead.

The machines were solely configured for his use. The other Journeymen all had to program their own settings on the production equipment they planned to use. They also took the time to thoroughly test and calibrate all of the machines because a large proportion of them had not been used in many months.

"Hey, what are you doing, Gloriana?!"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm bringing in the statue of the Superior Mother from my workshop to your workshop."

"You could have asked first!"

"You wouldn't mind, right? I know you regard this compartment as your so-called mancave, but I really hope your mother comes and gives us another blessing."

"I think she has already done enough."

Their baby was already far more powerful than any unborn child should be. Ves became increasingly wary of any further shenanigans that made their daughter even more removed from average baseline humans. Implanting a companion spirit seed in her developing spirituality should already be enough.

The statue still stayed in his workshop, though. Gloriana and Juliet all treated it as their good luck charm of some sorts. Even if the Superior Mother didn't make a move this time, just knowing that they were working directly in her sights would definitely boost their moods.

Once the preparations came to an end, Gloriana and Juliet both prayed right in front of the statue of the Superior Mother as usual. They looked extra earnest as their belief and gratitude towards the Supreme had skyrocketed after what happened last time.

Ves and Ketis didn't roll their eyes at the display this time. At least Ketis showed a bit more respect towards the remarkable statue that directly represented an ancestral spirit that was revered by trillions of Hexers.

"Is she really your mother?" Ketis asked as she casually polished her newly-reformed Bloodsinger with a cloth. "I mean in a literal sense."

"It's complicated. My mother isn't exactly... normal. She used to be a lot more human than before, though. The mother that raised me was just a normal-sized human. Something happened after that... Partially turned her into something more like this." Ves waved his hand at the giant statue.

"That must be some story." Ketis dryly remarked. "It must be really nice for you to be raised by such a lovely mother on a normal planet. My parents were different."

"You were raised on the frontier, right?"

"Yes." She sighed. "The settlements over there are not places that any girls should grow up in. I can't recall too many details of my life before I joined the Swordmaidens, but I am glad for that. I don't want them weighing down on me. As far as I'm concerned, the Swordmaidens are my actual family. Commander Lydia and Mayra gave me an entirely new life. They turned a weak, scrawny and hungry girl and molded her into a proper Swordmaiden."

Ves found it unfortunate that Ketis hadn't been able to grow up in a nicer environment. Children shouldn't ever grow up under these suboptimal circumstances.

"We can't save every child in human space, but we should at least make sure that none of our younger Larkinsons have to go through that. I consider our clan to be one big family. No one should ever feel alone in our fleet."

Ketis smiled. "That is one of things I love about the Larkinson Clan. It's just like the Swordmaidens but on a much bigger scale. I know that I can count on a Penitent Sister, Vandal, Avatar or any other Larkinson if I need help. I really hope we won't lose that once we become bigger."

"I hope so as well."

They both enjoyed their warmth together until Gloriana and Juliet finished their prayers. They returned with renewed enthusiasm.

"Let's start!"

They proceeded to fabricate the Vanguard Project. As a relatively bigger and fatter expert mech than the ones that came before, the four Journeymen had to process significantly more materials.

That didn't mean they had to fabricate a lot more parts. Most of the components that made up the Vanguard Project were relatively bigger and more robust in order to

account for all of the frequent impacts and shock damage the expert mech was expected to incur. Its two-layer armor system was a particularly big job.

The mood among the mech designers hadn't spiked all that much. Even with Blinky's design network did not give them much of an advantage this time because none of the Journeymen were as fired up as before.

It was not their fault. The Journeymen did not slack off and worked earnestly on an expert mech they respected. They all wanted to make the Larkinson Clan stronger and do right by Venerable Orfan by providing her with the best expert mech possible.

Yet... nothing remarkable happened. The fire just wasn't there. The Vanguard Project did not rank high in anyone's list of favorites. The Superior Mother never showed up and none of the mech designers gained any epiphanies.

Days passed by as the Vanguard Project slowly took shape. Once the mech designers fabricated a large collection of good-quality parts, they began to assemble it while Venerable Orfan and the other expert pilots watched on from the sides.

After just over a week of work interspersed by short breaks, the Design Department finally completed its third expert mech.

"It's a good mech." Ves simply said.

That should have sounded like a success in any other instance. In this context, though, it was not the best. The quality of the Vanguard Project was merely 'good'. It was not a masterwork and was too far away for Ves to ever consider using one of his gems.

To be honest, the Vanguard Project was just as good as the Dark Zephyr if not better. There shouldn't be a reason why any of the mech designers looked disappointed at this time.

Still, Ves felt that he could have made it great if the circumstances were different... He couldn't help but feel as if he failed in some way.